

paradigm

the vintage issue

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contents

FICTION ▪ 5

- A.M. or P.M.* Nancy Bonnington ▪ 6
Fiction Only. Randall Brown ▪ 10
A Small, Meaningful Death. David William Hill ▪ 11
To Grieve in America. G. Abam Mambo ▪ 15
Yeast and Yarn. Monet Moutrie ▪ 27
Ayanas. Shannon Prince ▪ 30
Not Josef. Jay Todd ▪ 37
The Foundation of the Heart. Sung J. Woo ▪ 46
Glutton. Jennifer Yee ▪ 55

NONFICTION ▪ 63

- China: Visiting Rites.* Stephen Greenblatt ▪ 64
Story-Telling. Stephen Greenblatt ▪ 77

POETRY ▪ 80

- Birthday Afghan.* Rebecca Balcarcel ▪ 81
The Poet. Jonas Kyle-Sidell ▪ 82
Private Nation. Jonas Kyle-Sidell ▪ 83
Coming Off the Mountain. Casady Monroe ▪ 86
Vespers. Kate Schmitt ▪ 88
One Small Piece. Kate Schmitt ▪ 89
Uncle Jamesie Recording December's Unbroken Law. Tom Sheehan ▪ 90
A Time of Time. Alex Tamaki ▪ 91
Calcutta, 10:05 am. Pinky Vincent ▪ 82

STAGE & SCREEN

- A Monologue.* Casady Monroe ▪ 94

CONTRIBUTORS ▪ 97

fiction

A.M. or P.M. by Nancy Bonnington

Come outside on the ferry deck, away from the smell of dying coffee grounds, and look at the men chasing toupees away from the seagulls. There is a pair of lovers on the deck taking in nothing around them. You think they look like the caulking in bathtub cracks. The wind wants to put them into the ocean, but they are stuck to the gray paint. You see them sighing and their sigh is very loud. It goes into your ear—a homing device for explosive news. You must eavesdrop on Rashid saying to his girl that he is from Morocco and will return with her in the spring. Rashid wears makeup, but still looks like a man you want in your photo album. His hair is blue, and you think all hair must be blue near the Straights of Gibraltar. Belinda says she will finish school and have a wedding at home where Uncle Edgar can dance a jig and spike the punch with false teeth.

You assume that Edgar loves Belinda with the eccentric twinge of lust in an old man's heart. That he will scoff at Rashid's magenta ballet shoes and talk about Uncle Bart who once tried out for the Rams. "Would have made it, but he had a trick knee."

Sometimes the planets blink at the earth and turn grown adult beings into astrology buffs. You think that she wonders what his sign is, and why the lunar glow, pointed just right, can clear her complexion faster than a tube of Clearasil. She has to know that there is a reason for sending in the sweepstakes entry. Just by chance, and maybe she would be lucky, they would draw her number, and she would be in Morocco. She would lose a million dollars. The fates would laugh. She would kill herself. Not because she is overwhelmed by the philosophical issues of her existence, not because she is only fifteen, not even because she isn't home to claim her prize. She would die because the fates laughed. See the creases on her forehead deepen; that is the pain of humiliation.

Belinda loves Rashid. You can tell that she loves beauty. He is beautiful. So is she. Belinda adores animals and that is wonderful. She has golden hair—it is more than blonde—it was molded from precious ores in the earth and seared to her scalp. When she brushes it it stretches, and the strands fall gentle like silk. She knows the face of the president, would recognize it if she saw it, but she isn't quite sure who the vice-president is. She likes romance novels, doesn't eat sweets, and once donated a dollar for a pin that said Greenpeace.

You can stroll nonchalantly now and pretend to flick your ash over the rail. Get closer to Rashid. See how long they have been acquainted. He no longer stares at her breasts when they talk.

Rashid has a brother who knows how to handcraft leather belts and key chain holders. He can sell the tourists maps of Morocco etched on cowhide. He would love Belinda—like a sister-in-law—and teach Rashid the art of leathery. Belinda's heart is confused. Her ears blush when she thinks of what to do.

You think that Uncle Edgar probably talked of marriage when he was young, and he stopped gambling because his wife was a Christian goddess, and they lived in a cottage in Brooklyn, and he wrote poetry while she milked goats in the alley and fed stray chickens

until somebody told them that you can't have a cottage with goats and chickens in the middle of Brooklyn. They must have believed it, for Edgar quit writing poetry. It is written on Belinda's face, the eyebrows that do a grand plié. The generations that slip one into the next.

You know that Belinda thinks the world of her great-uncle. He lives with her now because his wife is gone. He is senile, but she likes to make Earl Grey tea and watch him drink it. She likes to give him embroidered pillows that say "World's Greatest Uncle" on which he can rest his feet. She respects him because he knows how to pick a winner at the race track, can name all of the silent movie stars, and knows the meaning of life.

"Life is something we must get through," he told her once. And she knows it is true.

Belinda twists a silver band that fits on her little finger. She kisses Rashid again for the gift and says he should buy a silver earring for himself. They both eat clam chowder on the island and wonder if the clams were cooked. They will eat again when they get to Seattle.

You were once a child. You were stuck in an elevator. You forgot to stare above the door at the floor gauge, and you actually talked to the man in the brown polyester suit. You made him uncomfortable and that made you uncomfortable. Then you knew you were really alone—and always would be—in a tiny elevator stuck forever between here and there. That is how Belinda feels. She thinks of Morocco whenever she sees a tipped over coke bottle streaming into a sewer.

Rashid is tightening a wool scarf around his neck. He stands up very tall and plucks Belinda's hand into his. She looks directly at his Adam's apple when she stands. He wants to tell her about Morocco while they watch the oil slick glide past. He tells her about the fishing harbors where the men still reel in their nets by hand. He tells her about the citrus fruits and olive groves that cover the plains below the Atlas Mountains. His home is in Agadir, and Belinda thinks of Casablanca and Humphrey Bogart and shudders.

Belinda says she wants to stay in Seattle where she can go to the Farmer's Market, stare at the octopus and fish heads, and wonder who buys them.

"And you can stay here and work for my father in the shipyard," she says.

Rashid can do no more to change her mind, and Belinda's ears are very crimson. Watch him make a spider's web with nervous fingers. He is afraid he will go home alone.

Rashid is sixteen and has to shave the tip of his chin every day. His eyes are slabs of lava that pour right into his hair. He will never grow bald; he will have many girlfriends and be sought after for toothpaste and deodorant commercials.

Rashid tries again. He tries harder. He says he cannot stay in the United States much longer because his student visa is running out, and they would arrest him. She wonders what prison is like for illegal aliens and whether Rashid would be raped by his fellow inmates because he is so terribly pretty. She says maybe she would go with him to Morocco. She is afraid to say no. "Maybe, Rashid. Maybe."

Belinda holds his hand and she is far away. She is a ballerina in a glass dome. You find her in a remote shop (perhaps on the Boulevard Raspail), and you wind her up. The proprietor is cackling joie de vivre at his pet Chihuahua and poor Belinda pirouettes to “Sur la pont d’avion” around and around. She is wearing a pink tutu and a painted smile. She stops when the music stops and waits for someone to wind her up again, but you know Rashid’s arm is growing very tired.

Somebody else is on deck. She is an old lady. She is shrunken with age. She was once six feet tall, and now she is four feet tall, and in twenty years she will shrink right down to a small lump in the soil. The old lady asks Rashid what time it is.

“12:04,” he says, precisely.

“AM or PM?” she asks.

Rashid stares at the poor woman who doesn’t know the time of day. Belinda laughs.

“AM,” Belinda says.

“No, PM,” says Rashid. “Noon is PM and midnight is AM.”

“But midnight is nighttime, and afternoon is daytime,” Belinda insists.

The old lady finds it too cold to stand on the deck so she disappears while Belinda and Rashid have their first argument. Rashid is very gentle. He does not want to upset Belinda.

“You’re right. Sometimes I get mixed up,” Rashid says. “It’s 12:04 AM.”

Now you see Belinda is very stubborn. Never admits to being wrong. She is using Rashid for sport. You see what underlies her character. She is a tease.

She smiles. “AM,” she says, and, “Maybe I’ll go to Morocco with you.”

Rashid kisses her. Belinda closes her eyes, but Rashid does not close his eyes. He is scheming and his kiss is planned—not spontaneous.

“I want you with me in Morocco,” he whispers.

He is clever. Belinda falls for his bait. Her eyes are still shut and she says, “Why not? I could write to Uncle Edgar every week, couldn’t I?”

The wind is billowing through her blouse. His lips have thrown her off balance. Rashid puts his coat over her and shivers because he is a man and does not mind freezing.

“Are you hungry?” Rashid asks. “We’ll eat on the pier if you like.”

Belinda thinks about eating on the pier. She could eat at Ivar’s and it is such a familiar

place, she remembers that she must have a wedding at home because nobody makes their living by selling key chains in Seattle, and she doesn't want to fill out an absentee ballot when she is old enough to vote, and she would like to have a thirty-year mortgage on a house. Her friends have American accents, and she thinks Canadians are funny because they say "eh" a lot. That is culture shock enough. She cannot possibly leave home.

The captain throws the engines into reverse and makes the deck vibrate. You must search for your car keys while the ferry screeches into the pilings, and Belinda and Rashid head toward the foot-passenger exit.

Fiction Only by Randall Brown

Fiction Only. They had made that clear—and now he was brought before them and they would decide if they should remove him and his work.

Witnesses. First his mother. Yes, I drank Schaeffer beer. Yes, I let no one hold him. Yes, I made him memorize a vocabulary word a day in exchange for Lucky Charms, Cap 'N Crunch, or Count Chocula. Yes, he makes me guilty. Yes, feeling guilty makes me want to drink. Yes, I have red hair.

His father. Yes, I made him catch fly balls until it grew too dark. Yes, I walked around the house with that baseball bat. Yes, I brought his mother beers until she let me carry her upstairs. Yes, I demanded A's. Yes, I filled out his application for him to Tufts. Yes, I've never read anything he's written.

His grandfather. Yes, I took him West. Yes, we tied flies on the banks and then cast them in secret streams to fish that had never seen an artificial. Yes, he drove to Huntingdon from Boston in the middle of the night because he knew I was dying. Yes, I'm dead. Yes, he jumped into the grave and pounded on the coffin.

His third-grade girlfriend. Yes, he was smart. Yes, he was skinny. Yes, he was cute and funny. Yes, later, we all wondered what had happened. Yes, he got fat. Yes, he got angry. Yes, he kissed me. Yes, we met later, in senior year, at a party, and he screwed me against a tree. Yes, it hurt. Yes, I hated myself for it.

His high school best friend. Yes, I was bald by tenth grade. Yes, the Curve Inn served me Old Milwaukee pounders a six-pack at a time. Yes, we drank in parking lots. Yes, we dreamed about girls who wouldn't date us. Yes, we were in the Science Fiction Book Club. Yes, we looked for alternative universes. Yes, we threw up a lot.

His college girlfriend. Yes, he loved me, or said he did. Yes, I wanted to love him. Yes, he clung to me as if I were the only girl in the world. Yes, he was nice. Yes, he was sweet, Yes, we said things like we'd find each other later. Yes, we never did.

His uncle. Yes, I'm dying. Yes, they took out my colon. No, I never touched him.

"Well there you are," he tells the board.

They deliberate and judge. "You're lucky," they tell him and let him stay. They warn him about too much truth, how it creeps in and denies the imagination. He makes promises he won't keep. He wonders how to get witnesses to lie.

A Small, Meaningful Death by David William Hill

Thomas was in the back yard, scooping dog shit for the first time in two weeks, after several days of rain that had turned most of the turds into mush and made it nearly impossible to separate them from the grass with the scooper, when he heard the thunk. He might have seen it, out of the corner of his eye, flying into one of the windows that surround the enclosed back porch. He knows he saw it fall to the ground. It all happened so fast, the thunk, the flash in his peripheral vision. His first thought was that someone, some neighborhood kid, had thrown something, maybe on a dare, probably just being stupid. With the scooper still in his hand, and ready to hop the fence and chase down the offensive little bastard, he approached and saw that he was wrong, that a bird lay on the ground below the window. It writhed in pain and turned over onto its back.

The dogs hadn't noticed, but they saw that he was interested in something. Maggie, the little one, spotted it just as he scooped her up. He grabbed Emily's collar with his free hand and herded them both into the house. He gave them both treats to distract them, fished around in a drawer for pair of old, ratty garden gloves, and headed back to the bird.

It was a large one, an adult for sure, with grey and black markings on its back and an orange breast. A robin? Around here? And February no less. The black and grey markings brought to mind the mockingbirds that are so common in the area, building nests in trees low to the ground, their chicks, every spring, leaving the nest before they can fly. He'd seen, only a week before, a pair of adult mockingbirds engaged in their elaborate mating ritual. They flew high in the air and latched onto one another, their wings flapping and flashing that bright white as they descended toward the ground, separating just in time to regain flight. Then they did it again, and again.

But this was some other kind of bird. As Thomas crouched above it, the bird let its head fall to the side and curled its legs into the air. Thomas's breath heaved from his chest, a low, sad sigh. With the gloves on his hands, he touched the bird gently. It lifted its head and opened one eye. Then its eyelid fell back down, just halfway, and the bird's head leaned back into the ground. It was dead. It died right there, looking into Thomas's face, with an expression (Thomas swears the bird had an expression on its face) as if it had wanted to say something. A tiny, tiny drop of blood issued from the bird's beak onto the patio.

It was this sight, for some reason, that jolted his memory, that brought back to mind what had been pressing on him all morning and afternoon, his reason for trying to stay busy, washing the dishes, catching up on laundry, tossing all the moldy leftovers from the refrigerator, scooping up dog shit.

He'd found a lump. In the shower that morning, he'd checked himself for the first time, the first time even though Jenny often urged him to check. It reached the point of nagging, and so he lied. He'd been lying to her for several years now. Yes, I checked. No, nothing there. But for some reason, this morning, while standing in the shower, letting the hot water flow past his ears, he reached down to his groin. He moved his hand gently over one testicle,

pushing through the hair around his scrotum, and pressed lightly in several places. He felt it on the right side, the lump. He checked the left side for the sake of comparison, pushing on his testicle, searching for symmetry that might suggest everything was as it should be. He pushed so hard he nearly hurt himself. Stupid. Stupid for waiting so long to check. He might have called Jenny. He thought about it, but pride got the better of him. Instead he called the doctor. He needed a referral from his primary doctor, and no, it couldn't be called in. The doctor would have to see him. We have an opening Friday, two days from now. Is 11:45 okay? Two days. To pace, to keep busy, to not tell Jenny until he has more information. Keep busy, and now a dead bird on his hands.

There was no mark on the window, no small crack or smudge of oil or bird saliva. Maybe it was chasing an insect and couldn't pull up until it was too late. A miscalculation. But no, it hit the glass too hard, probably didn't see it, thought it could fly right through the porch. Hit it at full speed. Had Thomas not been there, the dogs would surely have found the bird. Maggie, the little cocker spaniel, spent her days in the spring chasing flocks of sparrows all over the yard until her tongue stretched to the ground. This would have been a golden opportunity for her, and Thomas, finding her later with the bird on the porch, might have thought she finally managed to catch one. And it would have broken his heart to see it. His little cuddly dog, always a bird chaser, now a bird killer.

He got the shovel from the garage and selected a place along the fence, near the nandina, not far from where the bird breathed its last. The hole would have to be deep enough to keep the dogs from picking up its scent and digging it back up. He dug down about two feet, nearly severing a pvc pipe, until the clay soil was too hard to break apart. He threw in a cup of organic potting soil to help the body decompose, then walked back to get the bird.

He was gentle with it, nervous. As he tried to lift its body, the head rotated so that it faced backward. He wanted the head to face forward, but he was afraid he might turn it the wrong way. It took several attempts to slide his hands under the body. The bird kept slipping away from his grip, like a wet bar of soap. He eventually managed a firm hold and lifted it so that the head was pointed toward the ground, and it flopped over, facing forward. When he laid it in the ground, he took care that it was on its side, then adjusted the body until it was in a position that looked comfortable. The one eye, the one facing skyward, was still half open.

Thomas thought there should be something more ceremonious here. He considered himself a steward of the semi-urban wildlife that took up residence in the neighborhood. Except for the rats and pigeons, of course. And the possums, whose carcasses littered the roads each morning. Some kind of prayer might be appropriate, but he was not a praying man. It was ridiculous to spend this kind of emotion on a hapless bird. It was nature at work. Birds died every day, and this one just happened to die in his yard. Still, he couldn't help it. Birds were special to Thomas. Despite his fierce proclamations of atheism, he saw something spiritual in them, and several times throughout his life he'd interpreted signs in their behavior, portents that informed him how events in his life might work out.

Once, in college, in the midst of a severe depression over failing grades and a girlfriend who'd dumped him and all his money running out, he awoke to a blackbird hopping around on top of him. The window above his bed had been open all night, and this bird had flown

in and landed on him. It cocked its head, chirped, hopped up to the windowsill, and flew away. Something about it had made him feel better, had made him want to get out of bed, despite the endless grey clouds that had plagued him for several months and would go on hiding the sun for several more.

And the time he visited the cemetery, after his brother Henry's third or fourth suicide attempt, that time when Thomas was punishing himself with guilt over beginning to wish that Henry would finally succeed, that he would take enough pills or jump off a high enough bridge, so that everyone could just grieve for his loss and get on with their lives. Thomas took long walks in those days, just wandering around town, and when he found himself at the gates of the new section of what was then the town's only cemetery, he entered.

He followed the road up the hill, gravestones stretching out across the landscape on either side of him. The place seemed both terrible and peaceful. He'd never been one to spend the night in a graveyard, as some of his friends had when they were younger. Horror movies terrified him, gave him nightmares, and there was no way he'd torture himself with ghost stories all night in a place like this. The gravestones varied in size and decoration, large and elaborate slabs with photographs embedded in them stood next to small plaques that didn't even stand upright, wouldn't even be visible if the grass were left uncut for a week. But no matter how much money was spent by those still among the living, everyone here was just as dead as anyone else. Why would anyone be in a hurry to die? And if he's in such a hurry, why so much fuss about it, trying and failing, failing again?

Thomas didn't know how far up the road he'd walked when he came across a dead bird in the gutter, a blue jay, dead at least several days. Most of its body had been flattened, surely by the wheels of a car. Ants crawled all over it, through its agape mouth, its nostrils, its eyes, by now just hollowed out sockets. It was late in the day, he'd been walking for hours, and he felt the late afternoon chill settle in on his bare arms. He heard caws behind him and turned to see two crows, pacing back and forth across the road like guards in a cell block.

Thomas traces his connection with birds back to his early childhood, on an afternoon he and some friends spent behind the house of an older kid they hardly knew. They were shooting BB guns at cans and other objects they found. Thomas doesn't remember exactly when or why, but at some point they started shooting at birds in the surrounding trees. He doesn't remember what kind of birds they were, but he remembers that he managed to shoot one, before he realized he had no interest in killing birds at all. His was the only shot fired in that moment, and the bird dropped to the ground like a rock. He was congratulated. Cheers went up. They rummaged around in the leaves until someone came up with it and twisted its neck to be sure it was dead. And the kid he hardly knew walked Thomas and the others over to what he called the sacred burial place for the birds he shot. It was a small hole, just a divot in the ground really, with a pile of six or seven decomposing birds. Thomas, as instructed, tossed his own bird on top of the pile, and everyone ran back to try and shoot some more.

It was important to Thomas that this bird, this one that had just flown into his house, would not be treated like that. It was important to him that the bird's body be laid down gently, that it look comfortable at the bottom of the hole.

But what kind of bird was it? He wasn't sure why this was important, but he stepped inside to retrieve his illustrated book on birds of Northern California. His mother had given it to him as a gift several years earlier. He'd never asked for it, had never looked at it much before now. He'd placed it in a prominent place on the bookshelf when she came to visit and hadn't yet bothered to stow it away somewhere else. The dogs leapt at him in the kitchen. He gave them treats and petted them for a moment to calm them down before returning to the yard.

Kneeling on the ground before the freshly dug grave, he searched through the pictures of the book, but there were too many. He looked up "robin" in the index and turned to that page. It was close. It was similar. The picture in the book was of a male, but the description gave details of both male and female. The markings on the breast, the color of the wing and tail feathers. It was a female robin. According to the book, it would be migrating through the area at this time of year, just passing through on its way north. He set the book down and paused just a moment longer, leaning over the hole he'd dug. Then with his bare hands he scooped the moist dirt back into the hole until the bird's body was covered, until the ground was level again. He packed the dirt down with his hands, trying to make it look as though nothing had happened.

To Grieve in America by G. Abam Mambo

You stand in the bathtub. The showerhead wheezes, spraying hot water across your face, which is half-raised as if in salute to a god. Your long arms are folded across your chest, each hand grabbing the opposite arm. A blue, plastic shower cap houses the tiny braids in your hair. Steam pervades the white-walled bathroom, settling on the sliding glass door around the tub, and on the white, enamel surfaces of the twin sinks. The mirrors are hazy, and vapor hangs midair like a nimbus cloud.

The shower blasts on. You remain in the tub long after the water has washed off the sliminess of your Olay bar soap; long enough that your teeth begin to chatter. You want an explanation. A miracle. Perhaps even the oracle. You try to utter prayer and imprecation in the same breath. But speech eludes you. Instead, an ocean of tears rise from your insides, forcing its way out so that your whole being trembles. You recognize these hot, salty tears that blaze against your cheeks and soon mix with the shower water so you can't tell one from the other. You've cried such tears before. They're the kind reserved for the dead.

* * *

You remember the first time you met Ryan. He'd come through your cashier's lane at CVS on a spring Saturday morning three years ago. He'd handed you a box of Allegra as he hurriedly blew into the tissue in his hand. You remember it was Allegra because you've always liked the Allegra commercial with the woman skipping through the field of yellow lilies under clear, blue skies. He'd come by again later that morning, and had introduced himself while you scanned the two packets of gum and a fitness magazine he'd pulled off the rack last minute. He'd asked for your name. Ngwe, you'd said. Un-gwe, he'd tried to mimic. You'd rolled your eyes.

That afternoon, he stopped by for a few bottles of water, and then later, for a pack of batteries, and just before your closing time, he showed up again waving two pairs of black socks. You eyed him with a little suspicion, and then he leaned over the conveyor belt and whispered: "I ran out of ideas of what to buy. Maybe next time, it'll be cereal or you could please just go out with me before I buy out the entire store."

"Gum, batteries, and socks? I'm pretty sure it'll take you a while to buy out the entire store," you said, not cracking a smile. Then you handed him the plastic bag with his socks.

"It could just be coffee. Or a smoothie, if you prefer. And it could be right over there," he said, pointing through the glass at the Starbucks across the street. "That way, if it's really bad, then at least you could... come back to work or something?" You examined his slightly freckled face, asking yourself why American boys thought drinking coffee, which you hated, was a great idea for a date. But you said okay. After all, you were curious. And he was not bad looking at all, with his sea-green eyes, pointy nose, and thin lips that easily widened into a warm smile.

On that first date a few days later, in the packed Starbucks across from your job, you felt terribly uncomfortable. You were quite certain people were looking at you, wondering what you were doing with the white guy. Or perhaps they were wondering what he was doing with you. Three white girls, probably in their late teens, were sitting on a table across from yours. Two of them were wearing matching University of Maryland sweatshirts, and the third girl was leaning heavily against one of the numerous opened textbooks on their table. They kept looking in your direction and giggling amongst themselves. It took you a while to pretend they were not there, not looking intently at you, then at Ryan. By the time you figured out that they were probably just talking about how good-looking Ryan was, you missed the first part of what he was saying. You caught him when he was talking about his dream to someday visit Mali.

“I am not from Mali,” you stated calmly. People were always mistaking where you’re from. If they ever managed to place you on the African continent to begin with, and not in Jamaica, Haiti or even England, then they assumed from your dark skin, tall, willowy frame, and angular face, that you were from black, northwestern Africa.

“I know. I didn’t think you were,” he said, embarrassing you. “They don’t speak English in Mali and your English sounds like the kind Nigerians speak. I was guessing Ghana or Sierra Leone.”

“Cameroon.”

“Ah! I don’t know much about Cameroon. Except that it’s kind of the reverse of Canada. Francophone majority, Anglophone minority, right?” He was showing off or trying to impress you. Either way, he only managed to annoy you.

“Or Canada is the reverse of Cameroon,” you responded testily.

“Okay...” he conceded, receding into his fleece jacket as though not to further offend you. An awkward silence ensued. You felt a little bad for attacking him like that. But you weren’t exactly sorry that you had. It annoyed you when people thought and spoke of Africa and Africans only in comparison to something else. You waited for him to speak again but he didn’t.

“So, Mali, huh? Why?” You licked the whipped cream that sat like a crown atop your hot chocolate.

“Why not?” He tore a few sachets of sugar and poured them into his drink.

“I mean, not that there’s anything wrong with Mali, but it’s not exactly a tourist location, is it? When people visit the continent, and by people, I mean you Americans and Europeans, they visit South Africa or Egypt or if they don’t mind mosquitoes and malaria so much, then perhaps Nigeria. But Mali? That’s definitely a first.” He laughed at how seriously you were taking this.

“I see you’ve decided I’m going there on vacation.” A smile played on his lips.

“And you’re not?” you asked indifferently, then sipped from your mug and placed it back on the small table standing between you.

“Nah. I want to learn about Dogon art.”

“Ah...” You’d never heard of it.

“My dad used to collect artwork from different parts of Africa when he traveled there many years ago. When I was a kid, he used to set them all up in the basement and teach me what each symbolized and what country each one came from. Then he’d quiz me about them and I got a nickel for every one I got right.”

“Must have been very interesting.” Even you were surprised by your sarcasm.

“Not really, but that was how we bonded. I immediately took to the Dogon carvings, though. I felt I could relate to them. The ones my dad had were all in full human form, and the women had really beautiful, slender bodies. And some nice, perky breasts,” he added with exaggerated flourish.

“I’m sure they did,” you nodded, finally allowing yourself a smile. The college girls had packed up and left and an elderly couple had taken their table near the window.

“And I was so fond of three of the women, that I gave them names.”

“Now you’re talking about those carvings as if they’re real people.”

“They were to me at that time. See, there was Olivia, named after my grandma. There was Claire, after my mother whom I never really knew since she passed away when I was really young. And then there was Linda.”

“Named after who?” You were beginning to feel more at ease.

“The little sister I always wanted but never had.” You finally had something in common, so this time you really smiled at him, and he smiled back. A friendship began to form.

Later that evening, as he drove you home, because you didn’t own a car yet, and he didn’t want you to wait around for the nine p.m. bus, he told you he liked all kinds of women – black, white, Hispanic. “I don’t discriminate. I love all God’s creatures of the fairer sex.”

“Good for you. I’m not interested in white men.”

“Me neither,” he responded, making it hard for you to restrain your loud, rippling laughter.

“I’m serious,” you insisted, “you all are crazy. And my parents will kill me. They don’t want to hear anything about American men. Especially white men.” But you didn’t stop

laughing at his jokes. And when he asked if he could take you out to dinner as he drove into the parking lot in front of your building, you didn't said no. And when he walked you to the lobby, leaned forward to kiss each cheek and said goodnight, you knew you were going to fall in love. That it was only a matter of time.

* * *

You come home from your physiology class at about 8:30 p.m. It was especially boring today. You start to feel that the road to medical school will be a lot rougher than you'd expected. You drop your backpack on the worn carpet in the living room and go to stand near the window overlooking the highway. You've always liked the way the yellow and red car lights merge to give life to something as lifeless as a road. Then you look at the Howard University calendar hanging by a pushpin on your wall. You use a highlighter from your coffee table to cross out today. Tomorrow, Ryan will be home.

It's been almost three years since you first met, and this year, he was able to secure a fellowship to fund his trip to Mali for a semester. You haven't seen him since he left right after New Year's Day six months ago. You can't wait; you can't wait.

Collapsing unto the brown leather couch in the one-bedroom apartment, you switch on the television with the remote. You flip through the channels and stop on HBO which is showing *Amistad*. Although you've seen this movie twice before, you notice for the first time the stark contrast between Djimon's charcoal and Matthew McConaughey's tan complexions as they stand facing each other in an intense scene. You look at the framed picture of you and Ryan which is sitting on the flat surface of your old Sanyo television. It was taken shortly after Ryan proposed at last year's Thanksgiving dinner in his father's house. You're still surprised at how easy it was for Ryan to pick up and leave for Mali only a week after his father was buried. He'd cried a little, but then it was back to business as usual.

In the picture, you and Ryan are facing each other, arms around each other's waists, huge smiles lighting up your faces, your engagement ring glittering on your left hand. You wonder now if you look like Djimon and Matthew, the dark and the tan juxtaposed. You fidget with your ring and think about your parents. Now you're certain of the reason you haven't told them about Ryan or the engagement.

Morgan Freeman is saying something when you fall asleep a little after nine p.m. The loud ring of your phone startles you. You sit up and look at the round clock on the beige wall behind the TV. It is 11:30. You reach for the receiver.

"Hello?" you whisper, still half-asleep.

"Babe..?"

"Ryan? Is that you, sweetie?" you scream, jumping to your feet.

"Yeah, it's me. I'm downstairs." Flinging your apartment door open, you run along the too-brightly lit, short hallway. You half fly down the stairs into the lobby, but when you

reach the glass door separating you from him and see him standing there, leaning heavily on one leg, a black traveling bag in his left hand, you don't immediately open the door. You stare at him for a while, trying to suppress the smile that's threatening to separate your lips. Ryan drops his bag on the concrete steps, and spreads open his arms, a grin consuming his tanned face.

You look at him through the glass as if to make certain it's him. As if to re-familiarize yourself with his greenish eyes, his thin, pinkish lips, his long chin, his big ears which seem more prominent now with his buzz cut. He stands there looking at you, as if he understands what you're doing. As if he's doing the same thing himself. Preparing his lips to greet yours; his hands to graze the sides of your long, graceful neck; his pointy nose to rub against the soft tip of yours. Then you both smile a knowing smile. And you open the door and throw your arms around his neck. He lifts you up and spins you around, all the while saying "Baby, baby, baby," in a deliberate way, making certain that it's you, reacquainting himself with the strong smell of Sulfur8 shampoo in your hair, and Jergens body smoothing lotion on your skin. You hang in mid-air, feeling little, feeling light. Then Ryan withdraws from your embrace, looks at you.

"I'm home," he exclaims, as if you don't know. His eyes seem transparent in the fluorescent light of the parking lot.

"I know!!!!" you scream in joy, jumping. You're like a little girl again. Ryan starts laughing, amazed at how happy you are to see him.

"Shall we go upstairs now, mademoiselle?" he asks, picking up his bag, and places an arm around you.

"I see you've learned a little French. But you know I would've been more impressed if you'd learned a local dialect," you reply, only half-joking. You turn around and pull the handle of the door. It doesn't open. You look at your empty hands as if you wouldn't have noticed if your bunch of keys were in them. Then you check your jean pockets and suddenly realize that in your haste, you forgot to take the keys with you. You look at Ryan, and smile foolishly, not trying to hide your embarrassment.

"Obviously, you haven't changed. Still crazy," he says, pulling you in for another hug. Your ear rubs against his collarbone, which you can feel through the thin fabric of his t-shirt.

"I know, right," you agree, holding him firmly around the waist, as if to squeeze the past six months out of him. "I'm glad you're home, Ryan," you say matter-of-factly.

"Me too, babe. Me too."

The neighborhood is as alive as it always is on weekend nights. Loud rock music escapes from the open window of an apartment in the complex opposite yours. Your Mexican neighbors on the first floor – Marc and Selena – seem to be entertaining tonight as they do on most weekend nights. Male and female voices speak loud, fast Spanish, only interspersed by bursts of laughter. The chatter is accompanied by the chinking of many glasses toasting,

probably to good health and long life. Marc's football teammates and their wives may be visiting again, and Selena must have made her special margarita, which you've enjoyed on those occasions when you both met to complain about your men and life in America. Kari, your next-door neighbor, is arguing with somebody - probably her boyfriend. She must be on the phone because you cannot hear anyone responding to her loud, "What the hell do you take me for?" which she asks again and again.

"Babe," Ryan calls softly.

"Yeeeeeaaaaah..." you drawl, reluctant to be drawn out of your reverie.

"Should we buzz one of your neighbors to let us in?"

* * *

Later that night, you both lie naked in your bed. You look at him under the glare of your tall bedroom lamp. He is a few shades darker.

"The sun is harsh over there. Clear, open skies," he explains, reading the question on your face. He's leaning on his side.

"Shoot, I'm not complaining. You know for me, darker is always better anyway." Ryan laughs, shaking his head. You snuggle up to him and playfully sniff around his neck. "You smell like desert," you declare giggling, then you drape one of your long legs over his hips.

"What does a desert smell like?" he asks, cupping one of your breasts in his right hand.

"Like sand." You lie on your back.

"So why not just say I smell like sand? Why desert?" He kisses your collarbone.

"Because it sounds more exotic to smell like desert. We always come back from Ocean City smelling like sand. But to smell like desert, you have to go far away. Like to Mali."

He looks at you and smiles, then kisses your belly. "You don't even know how much I've missed you. Being out there was fantastic, Ngwe, but I have missed you." He has since learned to pronounce your name correctly. "You know it's bad when I start missing your nagging."

"Whatever, silly! You know I only nag you because you're so messy."

"I know, honey, I know. I bought all this stuff which you'll love for our new place."

"What kind of things? Carvings of women with perky breasts?" you tease.

"I wanted to, but why do that when I have you right here?"

“Oh please! Don’t even give me that.” You roll your eyes, then gently scratch his scalp. He loves when you do that.

“It’s true. I just hope that my bags make it here soon. I don’t want any of that stuff to get lost or stolen.”

“Hmm...” you say, eyes closed.

“You think we should have babies soon?” You open your eyes.

“After we’re married, sure. But there’s still medical school, remember? I think my parents are waiting for that more than they’re waiting for a husband.”

“I don’t know about that... Seems to me that at this point, your mom is ready to pay you to get married and give her grandkids.” You both laugh because it is true. Your mother has been pestering you about marriage lately, and reminding you that at your age, twenty-four, she already had both your older brother and yourself. The last time you spoke with her she’d been especially serious about it. Get married, have children and send them to us, she’d said, and then you can do whatever it is you’re doing in that America. Everything has been more urgent for your parents since your brother, Ben, died five years ago.

“I’m with your mother on the marriage and kids thing,” Ryan interrupts your thoughts. “I used to think that I’d be married long before I turned twenty-nine. My parents had me when my dad was twenty-two. My mom was probably younger.”

You say nothing, but reach out and gently take his face in your hands and kiss his forehead. And then the tip of his nose. And then his cheeks. You skip his lips and kiss his stubbly chin. You’re sure that tomorrow you’ll find small patches of rashes on those parts of your body his chin grazed. But you don’t complain. You descend and kiss his throat and then the middle of his chest. He rolls over and rests on his back. You straddle him, placing your arms on either side of him, hoisting your naked body over his, so that part of your shadow is cast against his body.

“Have you told your parents about us?” he asks, catching you off-guard.

“I was going to but I...” You pull away from him and collapse onto the pillow on your side of the bed

“You still haven’t? So am I going to be your little, white secret forever?” His voice is calm.

“Ryan...”

“I’m just asking because you can keep a relationship, or even an engagement, under wraps, but a marriage? I really want to see how you’ll pull that one off.”

“I’ll tell them. I promise I will.”

“Yeah, just like you’ve been saying for two years.”

“Babe, I will...”

“Sure you will. Maybe when our first kid starts grade school.” He turns his back to you.

“Can we at least talk about this?”

“What’s there to talk about? You either tell them or you don’t. Where’s the in-between?” He gets out of bed, pulls a packet of cigarettes from his backpack and goes to smoke in the living room. You cannot stand it when he smokes. It’s a habit he picked up not too long after you began dating. Smoking has become his way of resolving problems. It’s as if he always finds resolution in the smoke rings he forms with his cigarette. Worse, you hate when he tries to kiss you after smoking. Not that he will try to kiss you tonight.

Half an hour later, Ryan comes back to bed and pulls the comforter over his head. You want to hit him, but mostly, you want to slap yourself. When he starts snoring softly, you reach out and turn off the bedside lamp, and then remain on your side of the bed, trying not to cry.

You know how your parents will take news of your marrying a white guy. Since Ben died, you have become their everything. To bring a foreigner into the family is something they were sure Ben would never do. You don’t want to disappoint them. You don’t want them to start grieving for your brother all over again.

But you do love Ryan. Being with him came so easily after that day at Starbucks. Although he was like many Americans you knew, with only superficial knowledge of the rest of the world, he’d been blessed with a huge appetite for new things. Six months into your relationship, he had developed a tongue for some spicy dishes, and knew that eru could be eaten with garri, water-fufu or kum-kum, and that achu soup could be wonderfully cleansing, and that there was a difference between jollof rice and Chinese fried rice, even if he couldn’t tell what the difference was. You knew he was not always interested in attending the African Student Association functions or the Cameroonian parties you attended, but he went. For you. He wanted to learn about you.

But sometimes he didn’t understand. Like when you kept sending money home to your cousin, Amah, who had kids with two different women and was always asking for money to start a new business, which he never did. Ryan couldn’t understand why you made yourself breadwinner for people older than yourself, people who ought to be taking care of themselves. There were things like that which you thought Ryan would never understand. The few times you regretted being with him were the times when you had to explain. You hated explaining. Explaining how you were related to your father’s step-brother’s daughter’s cousin. The concept of an extended family eluded him. He went as far back as grandparents and cousins. You hated that he didn’t have an ear for Makossa or Bend Skin or John Minang’s music. You hated that he will always be an outsider, and one who wouldn’t even try to be anything else for fear of intruding too much in your world. Sometimes, you despised his complaisance – giving or not giving only as much as you required. You were

sometimes ashamed to admit it, but you thought Ryan was soft. Too soft for a man.

But you realized your own hypocrisy. You knew that the only sacrifice you'd made for him, which was not for him at all, was coming to America. You hadn't had to learn about his ancestry – could never even get it straight if he was Scandinavian or Swedish. You hadn't known any other relatives besides his late father, his only living aunt, and the dead grandparents he sometimes spoke of fondly. You had never visited Maine to see where he attended middle and high school, where his mother was buried. But Ryan had done some things for you. Wonderful things.

He was special, really. But he was still American, still white. And he wanted to be an artist. Imagine that! You could just hear your parents now, especially your mother, Will he be able to put food on your table, or my daughter, do you want to be the man of the house and feed your husband? You just couldn't find the words to tell your parents that you had fallen in love with an American, a white man. And not even the kind that one could show off proudly and brag about, but an artist – not a lawyer, not a doctor, not even a professor like your father.

That night, you sleep badly. And when Ryan emerges from the shower shortly after 10 a.m., you're waiting up, ready to apologize.

"I'm sorry, Ryan. About last night and about not telling my parents. It's just that I'm so worried. Since my brother died, they're... kind of fragile, you know."

"Hmm... That's what you always say, but it's not an excuse, Ngwe" he says, toweling himself, not making eye contact. You want to make Ryan Cameroonian, or just black – anything that will make it a little easier for your people to accept him.

"Look, I know it's hard," he says sitting on the bed, the towel wrapped around his waist. "But it's not like my family didn't give me shit about being with you. That's the world we live in, but they're your parents, for Pete's sake, you can't hide us from them forever."

"I'll tell them today, I promise. I will." Your eyes are pleading now. "I just needed some courage, and now that you're here, I promise I'll do it."

"We don't have forever, Ngwe. I can't keep doing this. You're making me feel as though I'm in this by myself."

"You're not, I promise. I'm just being a coward."

"I don't know..." is all he manages. Then he dresses up and tells you he'll be right back. He needs to take a gift over to his friend, Jimmy. He picks up his car keys which have been sitting on the corner of your dresser since January, and makes for the door. You know you've really hurt him. You hear the keys turn in the lock and Ryan goes out, then comes back in.

"I'll be back in time for lunch, so we can go grab something together."

“Okay. Sounds great,” you enthuse. He smiles, before turning around.

Ryan doesn't make it home for lunch. When you receive a phone call from Doctor's Community Hospital in Lanham at about 3 p.m., you start calling down your favors from God. At the hospital, the doctor says she did all she could, although the paramedic later tells you Ryan was pretty much dead by the time he was extricated from the crash. All he tells you is that a trailer slammed into Ryan. In that long hospital corridor, tears don't come to you, but suddenly, your legs can no longer bear your weight. You slide unto the hospital floor, confused, as your spirit seems to rise and float above you, unmoored.

* * *

When you step out of the shower, you drape a large towel around your body and go to lie down on your bed. There's little else you're capable of doing these days. The tears stream down your face as you gaze steadily at the bare ceiling. You cannot help but feel that you are being punished; that he has been taken away from you because you didn't love him enough. Loneliness engulfs you. It's been two weeks since Ryan died, and four days since you last left your apartment. Your supervisor has called several times, asking you to return to work. Her first two messages are gentle, sympathizing, and as the days pass and you don't return to work, she sounds more threatening.

You suddenly feel as if you're in a new place – as if all that you knew about this country, about America, has been swept away with Ryan's death. Don't people mourn the dead? Don't they grieve? How can anyone expect you to show up to work so soon after Ryan's death? You remember seeing Ryan's relatives and friends, many of whom you didn't know, at his funeral. Some women had cried softly into their handkerchiefs, while the men held their heads high as if to salute the urn, to defy their tears. Later, during the reception, people had chatted light-heartedly in corners of the lounge, and had mingled in their stiff black clothes. At the end of the evening, Ryan's aunt had thanked everyone for coming to the reception. The way she'd said guests and reception had angered you.

To you, those are festive words, words of celebration, not words of mourning. To you, people who come to mourn with you, to sympathize with you, are not guests. You feel out of place in your grief. You've been unable to cry among them because you couldn't cry in the subtle way they did. You knew too, that they would find you too emotional, your crying too outlandish, had you lamented in the way your heart told you to, in the way your heart hurt. So you didn't cry. You didn't cry at the funeral home, or during the service or during the reception. And when people had come up to condole with you, laying firm hands around your shoulder to tell you that getting on with life is what Ryan would have wanted, you want to smack them.

But when that evening passes, and you return to your apartment, you fold over and begin to bawl. For days, you cry alone, ignoring the loud banging on your door, which you are sure belongs to Kari or Selena. Kari had asked you, days earlier, when she ran into you in the hallway, if there was anything she could do, if she could come over. You'd said no, thank you, fighting the urge to scream. When you lose somebody, people don't ask you if they can

do something, or if they can come over. They do something. And they come over. No one is invited to a funeral. No one is invited to mourn with you, but all are welcome. How don't these Americans understand this?

Then you think of your brother, Ben. He had taken ill one Friday morning and died suddenly. The doctors kept telling your family they weren't able to diagnose the problem. You think of how only hours after the news of his death spread, your aunts and uncles descended on your house in Yaoundé from all parts of the country. Of how they took over everything – your uncles, the arrangements to transport Ben's corpse home to Bamenda from Yaounde, so he could be buried in the family cemetery; and your aunts, of hosting the world of sympathizers who kept pouring in. You think of all your friends who'd shown up to help the women cook and clean. Who'd swept the yard and made sure everybody had something to eat for days before his burial.

Then your mind drifts to the orange, sunburned brick bungalow your parents own in Mbatu village. You think of the raffia palms stuck in the muddy soil around the front yard, announcing your family's bereavement. Of the rows of wooden benches and plastic chairs, which had been occupied for many days and nights before and after Ben's funeral. You remember the faces of the old women, your late grandmother's age-mates, who'd come to wipe your mother's tears; who'd sat with her and with you, and had told you not to cry, and when you hadn't stopped, had cried with you. You recall the younger women, your mother's age-mates, who'd organized the traditional dances for the different age groups; who'd cooked the large pots of plantains and beef streaming with vegetables and palm oil, which they'd served to the throngs of sympathizers. You remember the lamenting voices of the teenage girls who'd sang dirges, and shuffled solemnly around your brother's lifeless body as it laid in state. And who, every afternoon, had passed huge bowls of boiled corn and groundnut to all the mourners in the yard.

You begin to wonder how different things would have been had Ryan died in Cameroon. Had Ryan been Cameroonian, Ngemba. Would the men have fired shots from their long rifles into the air to announce his passing? Would Loh Benson, piano in front of him and beer in hand, have told Ryan's story to the weeping, dancing village crowd? Would his beer-tinged voice have bellowed:

Ryan Garner was born... In 1977
He lived in this world... 'Til 2006
He lived in this world... For only twenty-nine years
Ah-ah-ah

And would the crowd have chorused:

Tell me the story
Tell me the story
Tell me the story
Yes!

You shake your head, trying to think of what Ryan's story would've been, told in Loh

Benson's way. How the artful funeral singer would've told the crowd that Ryan was engaged – that he was going to marry one of the village's daughters. That he had dreams that were cut short. You start singing with the voice in your head, and fall asleep chanting: Tell me the story, tell me the story, tell me the story, yes!

When you wake up the next day, you dial home. Your father answers the phone.

"Hi Daddy," you croak into the phone.

"Hey Ngwe! My daughter how are you?"

"Fine, Daddy. I just wanted to tell you and Mummy that I'm coming home."

"You are?"

"Yes, Daddy. Just for a little while. A little holiday. I will call you guys later and explain. Please tell Mummy for me. Bye, Daddy." You hang up before he starts making inquiries. You search through your hand bag and pull out a card for a travel agency. You dial the number.

"Yeah, hi," you say to the receptionist on the other end of the line, "I'd like to book a roundtrip ticket to Cameroon, please."

Maybe even just for a few weeks, you can mourn Ryan in the manner he deserves.

Yeast and Yarn by Monet Moutrie

Walking behind him with hair swinging back against black, I am moving for there is little else to do. The foot behind mirrors the foot ahead and we walk on. Amidst all of this I wish only for a thin piece of string to tie around my left ring finger, a tiny thread to remember him against this backdrop of black.

There was a red thread. A red string that danced with me in that studio, all those years ago, waiting with me for my turn on the stage. Pivots and bends and breaking for granola bars and freshly baked bread. Her name was Lara and she had hair that was longer than my own; a delicate head with a long mane of bright ash hair. Beating against her body as she turned, wearing it down in the nights we spent together; breaking in tight knots as we stretched, waiting for the hour when the teacher would look at her and bend her knees deeper into the floor. “Find the measure of your spine pressing out and down into the planks below you. Feel it stretching and push always deeper.” The measure of the spine is unknowable, curved and hidden beneath the flesh and ribs of our bodies, of Lara and me. My spine curves both back and forward and from side to side bending me in four directions, like a compass broken, unsure of what is truly north. I tell this to her again. She looks at my back, exposed, and runs her hands, cold and white, along my spine, dotting with fingerprints the flesh in my back. She can feel the curve. She nods, and she turns, and she asks me to do the same. I run my hands down her spine, starting at the neck, covered with a dewy hair too thin to forget, I move down, feeling the ridges meet my tips again and again. Curving in towards her stomach I stop: perfect.

Lara and I were adventure. Always wanting to leave the studio doors and venture down the street into the light lit signs and shops of Acacia Avenue. Hungry girls dressed in tight leotards with pink leggings. On one corner, the farthest corner, sat an old man who would stare at our tiny bodies with quiet amusement. Not sexually, for our world was still unsexed, but with fascination, as if our bodies were examples of a new species, discovered along the coast in a fishing expedition. The man was always delighted, as if he had been the captain to haul up the new animal and display it to the world. Lara would hide her body behind a bag or her arms or even her hair, but I would arch and stretch and move my legs in long languid patterns, knowing my movement would stir his eyes to move quicker from left to right. His name was Roy. He had hair that fell in swooping curls, grey old curls, which reminded me of my grandmother and Lara of her mother. His eyes were blue and brown, each one flecked with the color of the other. But his body was old. His skin was dripping off of his bones, loose and speckled with the spots that come with age. His teeth were rotting, maybe even rotted, and I wanted to hand him a toothbrush or more appropriately a new set of teeth. But Roy never got anything from Lara and me. Besides seeing us walk, seeing me prance, Roy never received a thing.

The bread shop was what brought us outside the studio. We had lunches too, like other girls, but the bread shop baked fresh yeast bread every morning. The bread shop had huge cylinders where flour and water and yeast and honey were turned and churned until a huge glob of sticky dough came blobbing out. The bread shop was the place where our noses and

our mouths and our stomachs got to dance. She would hand us each a slice of the warm bread, still wanting to stretch a little further and grow a little larger, but Lara would eat that bread before it had time to move. Dripping with butter, melted and salty, and honey, fresh from the bear that always sat half-empty on the counter, there was something divine about this bread. On some mornings we ate blueberry bread, on other mornings asiago cheese. The bread would change with our feelings, with the weather, with the length of our skirts. The bread would change because we came, or so I once thought. Rebecca would laugh at us. “Always coming, always dancing.” We would smile at Rebecca, the woman with the bread, and she would smile back, laughing louder and more robustly than before. Rebecca must have loved us, always giving us bread, never asking for a dollar or even a dime. We never thought to offer her money, and Rebecca was never inclined to ask. So it continued for some time.

Rebecca had been born at the same hospital on the same day as my mother. A tiny air force base in the West part of Louisiana. They had spent their childhoods together, attending the same school, playing on the same rusted playground, and watching the same sunrises. But they never knew each other. Never became friends. Even today, Rebecca and my mother don't know that they came from the same place, at the same time, so many hundred miles away. Funny how being born is such an unmemorable experience.

“Your grandfather named me after his sister, you know? The one with the bright red lips?”

“Her? Auntie? She's old.” And she was old. Older than anyone had ever thought.

My mother would shake her hips at me then, glaring at me as if I had ruined her story.

“You're just young, when you're young everything is old”

Lara would eat her bread quickly; she was always hungry, always eating. Her bread would disappear before we rounded back towards the studio, before we past Roy sitting on the corner. But my bread, I made my bread last. I would eat the crust slowly, taking each darkened piece in with my front teeth and slowly chewing until the crust and my saliva had become one. Then I would hold the doughy insides, waiting for one minute, maybe even two, and thinking about how warm and soft bread could be. Like the flesh of Emma's baby. New and tender. Unmarked by harsh days and long nights. The best days for eating bread came on Fridays. On Fridays, Madame Julian would leave the ballet studio for an extra ten minutes. No one ever knew why. Perhaps a lover or a secret addiction. But ten minutes every Friday gave me ten more minutes to hold this bread and for me there was nothing more sublime.

Near Halloween, fall in the state where I came from, the city would stretch its limbs for one last hurrah before the bitter blizzards and piercing wind would strip us of our foliage. Walking down Acacia street, Lara and I would marvel at the trees, each decorated with nature's display of earthy colors but also carefully adorned with ribbons and lights that hung from nearly every branch. Our town and Mother Earth had joined hands to create something not quite beautiful but still deliciously enticing, drawing locals and visitors to stare

and sit amongst all this death. The day was cool and the sun, although lessened by a few straggling rain clouds, shone down upon the sidewalk, leading us from the studio doors. Lara was skipping.

The door leading to the bread shop was usually covered with various posters; musicians advertising their upcoming shows, community meetings held at firehouses or local libraries, the occasional ad for a baby-sitter or a lawn mower. The door was a key to the community; find it and you gain entrance into our daily world of living. But on this day I noticed only one poster, positioned slightly askew, and bearing the words "Night is shaking."

Lara and I sat against a tree after we heard. The man in the shop had been gracious, clearly experienced in handling situations of such a sensitive nature. He had tried to offer us a few muffins left over from yesterday's sale, but my stomach was empty and I felt that it should stay empty, just for a little longer. Lara wanted to talk. She was curious and startled and disgusted. I wanted to sit. Above us, dangling like the leftover remains of a pig carcass, were two red strings. They had fallen out from amidst the others; two stragglers who had lost their place. Reaching up to grab the string my eyes met a bird, perched in the corner of the tree, peering down with a head slightly tilted and eyes beating like the heart of a hummingbird, quickly and unapologetic.

I wanted Lara to see the bird too, I poked at her, nudging my face close and peering with her up through the leaves and the branches. But Lara looked at me, once only, took her hands behind her back, got up and walked away. I knew then that it was the string that I needed, something to tie tightly around my wrist, bearing the weight of what had just occurred. Rebecca gone. Wrists bleeding or bullet shot to the head. Lara leaving. Maybe returning, but like Rebecca, who really knows? It was this red string that would hold onto me, I thought, breaking only when I needed it to leave. And so I tied, twice to secure the knot, stepping up through the sunlight and walking back to the studio doors.

Now we are walking towards some light, orange and misty against the red dirt that has soaked up the heat of an 18-hour day. Everywhere there is movement, but he is the only energy that my own body can follow. Four months and four days until I walk away, leaving this and the sun that has taught me how to forgive. I need the red string now, tossed away so many years ago, hailed as a childish expression of coping and grief. The beating of the drums stills my thoughts though, and I can dwell no longer on dancing girls and soft loafs of warm bread. It is the black against the backdrop that holds me in wonder, and the piercing color of crimson red.

Ayanas by Shannon Prince

There is a subtle difference between fugitives and nomads. The difference is how they remember. The Romani are secret fugitives. Ever since they have been slurred with the name “Gypsy,” people have assumed their lives are the result of joyous wanderlust. They don’t see that they have been driven, not lured, from place to place, and if they could, maybe would forget the scorn that necessitated the journey. My parents used to say they were nomads, and people believed them, even though they only moved once in their adult lives. But that move was so devoid of any reason that could be articulated, it seemed like a journeyman’s simple desire for fresh beauty.

You can tell if someone is a nomad, because they and their people remember across the ground and time. They can pick the right mountain, dune, or desert patch from what look to me like identical natural phenomena. It was not enough for me to decide that my parents were lying about being nomads to point out that they only ever made one trip, that journeying was not their habit. It was realizing that they arrived at their destiny not as a nomad would have, for the love of Montana, but as fugitives do – in an attempt to forget California.

* * *

It was established as early as 1854 that most people who go to California looking for gold will not find it, but it has been known since 1854 that most people you try telling this to will not listen. My father and mother were college graduate/rebels from two different colleges in two different states when they decided to migrate to California. They had been raised in states nobody thought of until it was time to eat – Delaware and Wisconsin, respectively. Then they’d been in college in states you didn’t even remember were in the country until you were trying to rhyme something difficult in a poem – Arkansas and Missouri. They didn’t want to go some place best known for being a porthole to another world, Kansas, or that you could never picture outside of the pilgrim days – Oregon. California was where they thought people too conscious for the corporate world, too pampered for the natural, would find a haven for their uniqueness, so they migrated heliotropically towards its sunshine. My parents met one night when they both attended a reading of Whitman at Los Angeles’s Amaryllis Café – a grotto like place where people drank peach tea while sitting in wrought iron chairs surrounded by what were actually pink tiger lilies. Cozily sitting in the darkness at two adjacent tables, my parents didn’t know they were about to cease being strangers.

“Unscrew the locks from the doors!

Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!”

“I will not eat them, Sam I am,” whispered my dad to my mom, who gave him a polite smile. “Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself -”

"I meant what I said, and I said what I meant."

An elephant's faithful, one hundred percent," remarked my dad, as my mom leaned over and shushed him.

"Who is he that would become my follower?

Who would sign himself a candidate for my affections? The way is suspicious, the result uncertain, perhaps destructive -"

"You'll get mixed up, of course,
as you already know. You'll get mixed up
with many strange birds as you go."

"Be quiet!" my mom whined in anxiety, attracting the reader's attention and most of the audience's. After the reader made eye contact with her and pointed to the door, she embarrassedly slunk out and my dad tagged along after her.

"What was that?" asked my mom in frustration. "I can't believe you got me thrown out of there. I practically live at Amaryllis. And I love Whitman. If I'd lived back then I'd have married him!"

"You know he was gay, right?" asked my dad.

"That's neither here nor there," fumed my mom. "You know what I mean. I paid six dollars for a cup of Japanese white peach tea, which I was only able to drink 1/6 of, so you owe me 5/6 of a beverage."

My dad gave her another bad kid smile. A date with my mom, was of course, what he had wanted in the first place.

A California night is so many things... it is the sound of an ocean that strikes even atheists as holy... proximity to humans deified and proclaimed beautiful, wearing rare jewels excavated from the earth's hidden places, folk made eternal by the bright film records them... it is dreaming in a room that looks out onto the colored lanterns of Chinatown... it can only be outdone by a California morning.

My parents found each other in the California night, recognizing that neither of them had yet found themselves, and all of the things left behind by the folk singers and beatniks to help them along were just not allowing them to make it. My father didn't like Walt Whitman, didn't like poetry in general, loved the quiet wonder of scientific magazines, not the content but the tone. My mother was fatigued from greedy excess, time spent trying to acquire the tastes for Joni Mitchell music, kelp, hemp jewelry. My mother and father grasped hands and covered their eyes with the limbs that were free and hesitantly entered the California morning. In that light, they hoped to find a place to be. Marriage bound them together though it did not make them safe... They had to eat, had to drink, had to sleep somewhere at night where having your mortality proven to you was not a constant fear, so they had to work, but where? How much of a company's seal poisoning, tree maiming, child sacrificing

was too little to make it okay for you to work? My parents were people who knew how to be kind to each other, but did not know how to be good, didn't know if you should not eat meat or eat it raw, if there was too much violent revolution in the world or not enough, said so many times "We aren't religious, just spiritual," as one would say, "I don't take sugar in my coffee," and realized only in the subconscious that there could not be spirituality without the acknowledgement of a spirit, and so became lost in the Rumpelstiltskin-gold kingdom of California days.

They felt what so many people felt in those days, that perhaps they were not human in the ways they should be, or perhaps earth was not the proper environment for humans at all. Yet because they believed in no God who would cleanse the world of itself with either ocean or fire, it was up to humanity to flee the obsolescence of human life.

* * *

I was drawing a picture of pink wildflowers that I remember to this day as deeply as any love-emblematic real blossoms, when a child more worldly than I shook me into awareness.

"How come you're black if your parents are white?"

I told him calmly what I believed to be true.

"You know how some people have yellow hair but their children's hair is brown?"

"Yeah."

"And how some people have blue eyes, but their children have green eyes?"

He nodded.

"Well, you can be white and have a black baby."

My teacher overheard me saying this and told my parents they should tell me the truth.

"But how come you adopted me?" I pleaded to my mom later. She was combing her thick ochre hair and connected her gaze with mine only in the bathroom mirror. Her eyes were a charcoal darkened moss green I have never seen another human being look through, mine a brown so dark sometimes they seem to be orbs of deepest royal purple – there were times when I was older she would claim this was the reason.

"Because we wanted you so very much."

"But why didn't you just have me like everybody else's parents?"

She turned from the crystal mirror and grinned at me. "If I had had a baby, it wouldn't have been you. It would have been some little girl with my eyes and Ryan's thinning hair."

“It would have been me. I promise. If you had had a baby, it would have been me that came.”

“Mom and Dad didn’t want to have a baby, Honey. There are too many babies already who don’t have enough food to eat or clothes to wear or clean air to breathe. The earth is very tired. You’ll see one day that having babies isn’t really a very good or smart thing. If you want to be a parent, it’s better to adopt one of the babies already born.”

As I grew older, my mother’s words grew with me. I began to see more and more that they were the key to understanding not only my origin, but my mother’s and father’s entire way of life - the earth’s possibilities are blighted, hope is no longer worthy, nourish the life that has been left in humanity’s wake, but never harvest more.

You and the earth disentangle yourselves. Do not keep appearing in one another’s memories. Have no children so that the blood is not remembered, and your faces do not appear again, poignantly altered by love, throughout the generations. Solar power your glass house – not to spare the rivers from dams, but so as not to link your labor and money to strangers and corporations that become increasingly incomprehensible. Eat the things that do not linger – fruits and vegetables you grow yourself, for though you are unaware of the benefits or dangers of scientifically altered food, you know that science itself has not over your lifetime, over the earth’s lifetime, healed us but made more efficient our deaths and our dying, more acceptable the earth’s suffering, more capable the powers of everything wrong with our humanity.

My parents were like so many ex-Californians in those days who had tried to push one beached whale back to sea only to see another one ashore, and they also realized that the best fries were at McDonald’s, the corporate demon, and why couldn’t there be some holistic, healthy, non-hegemonic place where you could get equally good fries. And you were never going to make a quick run anywhere, the highway would always be clogged with SUV traffic, so if you say to your spouse that you will, you’re really just lying.

My parents were gripped in the fear, heartbreak, and internalized crisis common among Californian refugees, that drama so pernicious because it was so functional. It had been so long since they believed in God – childhood days of forced Sunday school – so Heaven was not a possibility, but if only they could get somewhere not California of the futile dreams, they might be safe.

Montana seemed a place so eternal it had to be indifferent to anything mortal - a place where they could forget, or at least bury the prior passions that had claimed and mutilated their lives, and begin a life of austere detachment. Cleanly divided into red expanses and towers of rock carved by oceans that now existed only in mythological history, and sky so blue it seemed like a stone that should crystallize somewhere next to cobalt, Montana was totally primary in color, no compromising palette of deviating or mixing hues, it was like pre-demonic Manichean life, so free of all the trouble of creation. Montana would never involve itself in my parents’ lives the way California had. If their lives, though fruitless, had to be lived, they could at least be lived in a place that seemed as relentlessly separate from protean, doomed life as my parents longed to be.

And I – I was their last ditch effort at revolution, my adoption process occurring at the same time as my parents’ move. When the confused passion in them was waning, yet had not died, they thought they might adopt an unwanted child, black for progressive credibility. And in a mangled attempt at secular religion, they hoped that I would convert others to prudent pessimist separation after their demise, that I would be the descendant to usher the socially aware from a place where there was no truth for them to be aware of.

* * *

I was a teenager when I met Calla. She moved next door to our glass house into a wooden many-windowed bungalow of her own and proceeded to enrapture me until she left the earth. She had been a good child, so good in fact that she claimed God had to make her days exceedingly long in number just to be fair. She was so old, yet so energetic and coherent, no one believed the number she gave out, and she had no driver’s license to prove it, but she had been such a smiling help to her parents who had a cottage-tailoring business, she said, how could God take her from the earth without first supplying her with a bevy of scores? But, she would add calmly, that deal was up. God had certainly repaid her with an excessive number of years. She had come to Montana from Oregon, because, as she explained, she needed a certain amount of sun for dying.

My parents would have rather seen me spend time with anyone other than Calla. They didn’t think she was a good influence. She had had too many children. Eighteen. And that was no suspect hyperbole – their pictures were all over the wooden beams of her home.

“Don’t you want to be near your children when you die, Calla?” I asked her at the beginning.

“That was our plan for my husband’s death.” She shuddered. “It’s better not to let your children see that, or theirs and theirs.” Calla had enough generations of descendants to put a Genesis patriarch to shame.

“Happy is the man who has his quiver full,” she had explained over my parents’ welcome dinner when she first moved to the neighborhood.

“The man,” said my mom.

“God means the woman, too,” smiled Calla. “You can’t give life without acquiring it yourself.”

That was the last time Calla was invited to our home, but that didn’t stop her from welcoming me into hers. She had lived so long she said, not solely on the virtue of her childhood goodness, but also because she had always believed that just as the body needs certain foods to keep it out of the graveyard, the spirit has its own desires that must be fulfilled to keep it within the body. I saw what she was planning in her little glass and gray wood house. I saw how she wanted me, as she was sparing her own family, to be her companion for death by proxy. And I saw that something compelled her, perhaps the God

she was sure was micromanaging her longevity, to teach me the art of becoming an elder.

And as much as I loved Calla, she scared me. She had given so much life when my parents had taught me that labor profaned the earth. She relished the fact that she had resided for so long on a blue planet my parents assured me was no longer viable. She loved me, so she wanted to bequeath me what she thought to be the greatest of gifts - a long life with which to engage with others, commune with the world, and try to work a little alchemy on the eras you were privy to. My parents loved me as well, so they chose to teach me alienation from an illusory ethical system and solitude among a consuming and ill society. But if I didn't have a radical boyfriend during my teenage years, if I never rebelled, my one disobedience was falling in love with Calla, learning her subversive ways.

"I remember," Calla told me, "the different stages of my life not by my age, height, or grade, but by desire."

She put her hand on my stomach and pushed in firmly. "The stomach is a loud thing, all most people ever hear. Those people don't live as long as me. Listen here," she said, extending a long unpainted nail to my heart.

"The first thing I ever needed desperately were green geckos. I slept later than my sisters and brothers as a little girl. Not sleeping really, just lying in bed monitoring my fantasies and metamorphosis. I looked out the window one morning, alone in the bedroom, and saw a nest of lizards." She laughed self-deprecatingly. "I couldn't have been happier had a bunch of centaurs allowed me to watch their archery practice. It used to make me laugh to see them crouch and bounce every few seconds, and then inhale and fill their white throats with that strange sphere of air. But best of all, at their necks was a toxic-looking fluorescent color that combined blue and green into a shimmery shade prettier than anything I'd ever seen."

"It got to be that every morning, even if I was starving for my breakfast, I'd stay in bed, hoping for my lizards. Days when it rained and they did not appear, I wept with loneliness. But even though they often caused me pain, loving them, wanting them, deepened my life, bound me to living in a way that transcended species. Loving something not human made my soul more than the soul of a human being. It took the colors off my spirit, stripped it and washed it clean, and plunged it into a silent harmony of animalia and flora and unity. This has made me whole, this has made me fertile. This has kept me on the earth for so long.

"I am scared for you with them," she told me. "How can you ever germinate if you are continually told the fields are disintegrating all around you. You've got to put your roots deep into the earth and believe it will support your girth." She looked at me then with a smile I can still neither label as ironic or warning, "If you never connect your spirit to anything on earth, God might think you don't want it to live here. He might just blow it away."

I left her then. The sun was low and maroon and I wanted her to be alone to rest in its pink light. I did not know she would die in that rosiness. I lay in my glass bedroom that night and took stock of what Calla had told me. Would a God my parents had always insisted was imaginary reclaim my life if He thought I didn't value it? Should I risk it? How

long did I have before He lost his patience with me? What could I do to show Him different?

* * *

I spend my twenties in Houston in a homeless shelter, ostensibly using my college degree from one of those thoroughly American sounding states that still no one knows anything about, Nebraska, to benefit a non-profit organization. My office was supposed to be a place where I converted my fairy tale oriented English major into grant writing skills, yet I ended up being the resident psychologist. People come to my office filthy with despair, worn ragged from fear, haunted by lack, dying of solitude, and I put aside my numbers sheets, red ink, black ink, cease my legal begging. Most times they don't need my voice – excepting the odd “Hush, hush,” “You're okay,” “I got ya,” “Would you like me to pray with you?” Most times they come for my body. I let them press their unwashed faces to my shoulders or bosom or lay across my lap – war vets elderly and proud do it without hesitation. I let their snagged dirty hair spread over my shoulder and take the tears that come as they recall to me erupting bombs, laundry in sewers, their landlord/best friend/ most responsible child saying it had been long enough, the doctor's diagnosis, the spouse's death, the mental hospital's cruelty.

When I go home each night, I smell like somebody abandoned; I am stained like someone discarded. My supervisor asks me, “Don't they scare you?” She does not know that every embrace knits me to life. The street people's memories become my own and anchor my soul to the earth. She doesn't know that as they utter to me each horror they have faced, I am reminded of the evil of life, but as they lean against, and taking healing from my body, I understand that there is a tenderness in living even greater. I will not fear my life or my planet because of its shadows; I will live out my days in search of their light. I am not a fugitive. I am a pilgrim.

Not Josef by Jay Todd

Tonight Josef stands where he always stands for the train—on the thick yellow line of paint at the platform's edge—but he doesn't want to get on the train tonight. If he gets on the train, it will take him to Pappagallo's, and if he gets to Pappagallo's, he'll see Anna, and if he sees Anna, she'll break up with him. Throughout the day, he thought about telling her he had to work late to put this inevitability off another day. He's never been a good liar though. The peculiarities of reality are hard enough to keep straight.

Chicago in March shouldn't be as warm as it is, the setting sun still too bright, so he keeps his jacket draped over his arm and keeps checking to make sure his wallet hasn't fallen out of the inside pocket. To his right he can barely discern the glimmer of the train headlight. Other passengers stand scattered further down the platform in their usual spots. The old woman on a motorized scooter, though, is next to him, on his left, he assumes, because he held the door at the top of the ramp as she revved its weak engine up the length of concrete. It sounded terrible, shrieking as it labored up the slope, and Josef held the door for over a minute, not wanting to look rude by letting it inch slowly shut on its own. Finally at the door, she said something in Polish as she rolled past. Josef only knows enough Polish to recognize it as Polish.

The horn bleats as the train approaches and the old woman's scooter whirs as she and the others begin moving to the edge of the platform. The scooter still sounds strained, the pitch changing high to low and back. Grocery bags with milk and celery sticking out fill the basket hanging in front of the handlebars. Over white hair and pink curlers she wears a flowery babushka. She reminds him of his grandmother, not in appearance—his grandmother outweighed this woman by a hundred pounds—but in stubbornness, in insisting on going for groceries herself, despite the difficulty of getting around. It's an assumption he feels justified in making. His grandmother spent her last decade hobbling around the South Side with a clumsy aluminum walker, going to Mass every morning because she had always gone to Mass every morning.

Josef watches now as the scooter's front wheel rolls over the edge of the platform. Below them, around the tracks, the rocks start to tremble. He keeps watching the scooter move forward. The bottom scrapes the lip of the concrete, and the scooter see-saws. This is wrong, Josef thinks, but no one else seems to notice. The old woman's face goes blank, and the scooter seems to fall before she does, Looney Toons style.

Then Josef is hearing the blare of the horn again, louder, desperate, and the metal wheels grinding against the metal tracks, and then he's bent over the old woman lying on the concrete. Josef feels the warm blast of air that surrounds the trains as they come in, a blast strong enough to knock you off balance if you aren't paying attention or if you are paying attention to an old Polish woman. He falls forward, his hands slapping the concrete on either side of her. The train hits her scooter, scoops it up like a wayward branch, and sends it and the groceries flying in various directions. One of the tires almost plows through the other passengers who have noticed what has happened and are moving toward Josef and the

old woman. Josef helps himself up; everyone surrounds the old woman. Off in the distance, Josef can see someone jumping down from the engine and running toward them. No one looks at Josef. He's nothing more than a shadow in their collective peripheral vision. He turns, then, and runs back down the ramp to the station entrance, crosses three intersections busy with rush hour traffic and hails the first cab he sees. It isn't until the cab stops in front of the restaurant and as the first drops of an all-night rain begin to fall that Josef realizes he's lost his jacket.

Anna's not at the restaurant, so Josef takes a table and orders a beer. Although he hardly ever drinks, he manages to empty the excessively tall narrow glass by the time Anna appears ten minutes later. She's wearing a long tight beige dress; Josef can't remember out if he's seen this outfit before. Her hand on his shoulder, she leans to kiss him and black hair sweeps across his face. She asks what's wrong and, sitting next to him, slides her hand down to his as he starts to tell her what he can remember. Nothing seems to keep his body from shaking.

* * *

The next morning, Anna gasps as she reads the Sun-Times. Josef stands next to the sink filling two coffee cups and turns to her, thinking she's choking on something. As soon as they woke Anna ran down the three flights of stairs for the newspaper. She walked back into the apartment holding her old robe together while scanning the front page. "I won't be in there," Josef told her as she sat at the coffee table and began flipping through the pages. "Nobody knows it was me." Anna continued to scan while the coffee brewed. Her coffee. Last night was the first weeknight he's spent here, and he's trying to adjust to the feeling. He likes it, the sloppiness of it, even if it means taking a cab back to his apartment to shower and dress for work.

Now he sets her mug on the table as she slaps the paper down and keeps it there with one long finger in the middle of page six. "They've got you," she says. Josef leans over her shoulder, the steam from his coffee mixing with the perfume that still hangs around her neck, and reads:

Commuter Saves Life

An alert man saved the life of an elderly woman last night when he pulled her to safety seconds before the train could crush her.

Josef Siebert, 30, of Oak Park reacted with amazing speed and bravery when Svetlana Minski, 84, of Berwyn accidentally drove her motorized scooter onto the tracks at the Ashland CTA station. The westbound green line train sped into the station only seconds later.

Lauren Harmon was one of several commuters who witnessed the accident. "No one was paying attention. If he [Siebert] hadn't been there, she [Minski] would be dead."

"The cart wouldn't stop," Minski explained from her bed at the University of Illinois Medical Center. She suffered a broken leg and a dislocated shoulder.

A public relations officer for the manufacturer of the scooter, the Hummingbird 3000, said malfunctions of this type are highly uncommon.

Siebert was unavailable for comment at press time.

"You're a hero," Anna says almost giddy.

"I'm not," Josef says.

"They," Anna still pointing at the article says, "call you a hero."

Actually, they don't, but Josef doesn't want to bicker. The feeling that Anna will dump him hasn't left; it still hovers somewhere in the back of his head. All of his relationships have been ended after two months, but something here has changed. The accident happened: he keeps thinking of it as an accident, not just the old woman's falling onto the tracks, but everything, the scooter, the crash, his actions, all a part of something that wasn't supposed to happen. If he hadn't been on that platform at that time in that spot, rather than leading him into the apartment after dinner, giving him a tight hug and an I'm so glad you weren't hurt and dropping to her knees while Josef leaned against the front door, his body trembling again, Anna would have, at some point in the evening, told him things weren't working out.

"You don't want to take credit," she says.

"I'd like to forget about it."

"You're not impressed with yourself?" While she says this, she tears the newspaper along the edge of the table.

"What are you doing?"

She turns the paper ninety degrees and makes another tear. "Saving your story."

"It's not my story."

Another turn, another tear. "It's a story about you." Turn, tear.

Josef corrects her: "About the guy who saved the old lady."

Finished tearing, Anna waves the square story in his face. "That's you." The hollowed out page six remains on the table as if someone has censored it, eliminating the objectionable material. If only Josef could do likewise to every newspaper in the city.

"I'm not so sure."

Not wanting to look at the newspaper anymore, even with the story—his or otherwise—removed, Josef stares out the window, down three flights and across the street to the little playground next to St. Francis de Sales Elementary School. The playground is one of the

super-safe kind, all blue and red and yellow plastic. His own kitchen window looks out onto an alley, a Dumpster, feral cats, the occasional bum. He could get used to this, if only he had some clean clothes here. He remembers now and says, "My wallet." Without drinking his coffee he decides he needs to go. He kisses Anna goodbye and asks her not to tell anyone about it. "I mean, don't tell people I'm him," he says pointing at the hole in the newspaper.

Because it takes longer than it should to get a cab, Josef has to rush around his apartment. It's not until he's about to leave again, his tie in his pocket and his shirt half-buttoned, that he notices the number twelve blinking on his answering machine. He rarely has more than one message on the machine when he gets home from work, and that usually from a telemarketer who waited too long to hang up. Instead of listening, he deletes the messages and calls for another cab, uninterested in being anywhere near a train station.

* * *

Everyone at work will want to talk to him about it, he figures, so he goes up the rear stairway and slinks into his cubicle. Going in the normal way would mean riding the elevator with people who might ask questions and walking past Marie, the receptionist, who would definitely ask questions. Some part of him wants them to ask their questions, to let him talk about it without having to bring it up himself. Conversation is always easier that way, but they would want to know how he did it, how he moved so fast. Anyone who knows Josef can't imagine him reacting to any situation, let alone a life or death one, with rapidity and precision. Not Josef. Since he could walk, he's been the endearing klutz, the inadvertent class clown who tripped over his own feet and dropped cafeteria trays and fell off walls.

But nobody comes in to talk to him about it. People walk past his door and see him pretending to work and even pause at his doorway and then move on. They could come in, could talk, could even sit down. Two chairs face his desk, two chairs that may never have been used. People know, maybe, that he won't want to talk about it, so they don't talk to him about it. This comes to him now, as he stares at mutual fund trends on his monitor and listens to someone a few thin walls away tell someone else about her daughter's upcoming wedding: he's never mentioned Anna to anyone in the office. No one has asked him about his social life, and he has never found a way to work her name into any conversation. Even if he did, he wouldn't know how to explain it. He's spent the last seven weeks trying to figure out how he and Anna ended up together. It was some cosmic fluke, a malfunction like the old lady's scooter, a mistake that he keeps expecting to be corrected at any minute. And if he had told them about her, told them he has been dating a pretty investment counselor, a woman with pale skin and dark hair who likes to cook Lebanese food while listening to bluegrass music, he would eventually have to tell them that that very beautiful and interesting woman had broken up with him.

In spite of his coworkers' avoidance, the phone calls begin in the afternoon. Josef evades the first several reporters by telling them he can't talk at work. "Please call me at home," he keeps saying before hanging up. He gets fed up finally and finds himself saying—a touch too loud—"You know where I live and where I work. What else is there to know?"

"Our audience," this reporter says quickly, "want to know what kind of person risks his

life for a total stranger." She introduced herself as from WMAQ's News Today Live, but to Josef, who doesn't own a TV, that means nothing.

"I couldn't begin to answer that," Josef says.

"Okay, something easier. How did you do it?"

"You'd have to ask the old woman."

"She's not saying much," the reporter says, "and what she does say is usually in Polish."

* * *

In exchange for a promise to call her back, the reporter gives him Svetlana Minski's hospital room number. Now, inside Room 318, she finishes her dinner, sitting up and poking a fork at what looks like broiled chicken. She looks older than Josef remembers. Maybe it's all the thin and curly white hair he couldn't see yesterday. Maybe it's the environment, the bed, the gown, the machine tracking her heart rate. The cast on her left leg sticks out from under the pale blue bed sheets.

She sets down her fork and pushes the food tray away. "I'm done," she says without looking at Josef. "You can take it."

"Oh," Josef says, "no. I'm not an orderly."

Now she looks at him standing in the doorway. He introduces himself and steps fully into the small room. The air is cool in that antiseptic sort of way. She doesn't react to his name. "I'm the one—the other day—the train."

Svetlana leans toward him and says something and, when Josef doesn't move, adds, "Come here."

Standing next to the bed, Josef doesn't know if he should stare at her the way she's staring at him or look away, out the window at the traffic already backing up on the Eisenhower or at Oprah's muted discussion on the TV.

She shakes her head. "Nie," she says. "Not you."

"What?"

"Not you," she says again. "He was taller."

Josef straightens as she says this. "No. I mean yes. It was me."

But the old woman won't have it. She waves a thick-knuckled hand in his direction. "Who are you? A reporter?" She presses a button somewhere and she and the bed begin to recline. "You want my story."

"I have my own story," Josef says.

"Yah?" She stops the bed when she's almost prone. "What's your story, then?"

"We were at the station. I held the door for you. Your scooter wouldn't stop."

"Then?"

Josef shakes his head. "I don't know."

"Yah."

"I was hoping you could tell me."

Svetlana looks at the TV as she flips through the channels. "My lawyer. He tells me, 'Don't talk about it until we settle.'"

"You don't remember, either."

Now she looks at him, angry. "I remember he was taller."

* * *

Josef takes a cab home, and as it turns onto his street, he sees a WMAQ news van, pure white with the rainbow peacock on the side and the antenna on the roof like a monstrous cowlick, driving past his building, coming toward the cab. "Keep going," he tells the cabdriver and slouches down. The driver leaves him at the Texaco station around the corner. He can go in the rear entrance, down through the laundry room, up the back stairway. He's getting good at this, going in the back way.

One of the reasons Josef liked this apartment when he first saw it was the number of windows, ten in all. He's always liked staring out windows, even if they don't offer any particularly grand view, which these don't: they all look out onto the alley behind the building or the parking lot in front. He likes the stillness of seeing the same things every time he looks out. If things don't change, they can't get worse. When he first moved in, only three of the windows had mini-blinds and he's never gotten around to buying blinds for the others. Now, with the apartment under surveillance, he leaves the lights off and stays well away from the bare windows. To get to his bedroom, where the blinds are, he has to crawl underneath the big window between the front room and the kitchen, his belt buckle clicking against the wood floor. He calls Anna and asks if he can sleep there again, throws some clothes into his gym bag, and crawls back out of his apartment.

On the phone, Anna called him hero and seemed to take a particular pleasure in saying it, softening the H with an exhalation of breath, "Hello, Hero," she breathed and does it again when he walks into her apartment. Josef wonders if she has always spoken this way and he's failed to notice. "I ordered a pizza," she says with no special emphasis. "You don't want to

be surrounded by people in a restaurant tonight." Josef likes the way she says rather than asks what he's thinking.

* * *

He decides to work from home—Anna's home—Friday, something he's been told he can do but has never tried. It never made much sense, working without going to work. Devoting the morning to the annual report he should have finished auditing yesterday, he finds one minor mistake on the second page that causes most of the other calculations to be wrong. The entire report is a cascade of errors. He sends an email to the necessary people explaining the problem and what needs changing as a result. This is what they pay him to do, to find miscalculations, and this is what he's good at. No one will be surprised he found the mistake; no one will ask how he did so.

Around two, he ventures out. At his apartment last night, he grabbed enough clothes for the weekend but forgot his toiletries. It's been years since he has gone a day without shaving, and he hates the coarseness of the shadow growing on his face. There's a Walgreen's five blocks from Anna's; he can get there and back in a half hour. Putting on an old White Sox cap he finds in the closet, he walks outside thinking about those tabloid pictures of celebrities, hastily dressed and unkempt, pulled into the ugly real world by the need to buy a gallon of milk or a bunch of celery.

Josef hurries through Walgreen's, buying all the travel-size supplies he can find. He wonders how Anna will react when she sees a cluster of men's things in her woman's bathroom. She'll probably say it makes the place feel more comfortable. She's been good to him, he thinks while the cashier scans his items, though he still can't figure out why. It's the same as the accident: knowing what has happened but not knowing how to explain it.

Outside, Josef hears an El train pulling into the station at the far end of the parking lot. Unlike his usual station, here you have to put your ticket through a scanner to pass through the turnstile, so he buys a one-way ticket, climbs the stairs—how would the old woman and her scooter get to this train?—and finds the platform full of tourists and day-trippers. He waits for the train to come and go and the station to empty.

He only has a few minutes before people for the next train will begin to appear. He sets his Walgreen's bag on a bench and steps to the edge of the platform. To his right Josef remembers the train headlight at a distance, to his left the groceries and the babushka, the scooter creeping closer. Then. The front wheel going over. A loud click as the bottom of the scooter hit the concrete. Then. He and the old woman looking at each other when they realized what was happening. Josef just watched her fall. Then. The noises louder, the train nearer, the engineer blaring his horn. Then.

Josef crouches over the edge and makes a scooping motion with his right arm, digging into the air above the tracks. He wouldn't have been able to reach her. He drops to his knees and scoops again, but he would have felt the impact, bone against concrete, if not when it happened certainly afterwards. His palms still have scratches from when the train wind knocked him flat. Did he grab her out of the air, before she landed? Josef returns to his

original position looking forward and tries to swing his body to the left. He tries several times. Even premeditated he can't do it fast enough. He's about to try hopping down onto the gravel by the tracks when he hears people coming up the stairs.

* * *

"I think the old woman is right," Josef tells Anna when she gets home. "I don't think it was me." It's the only conclusion he's been able to draw. Anna looks tired with her briefcase pulling her shoulders forward. "Physically impossible," Josef continues.

Anna says, "Oh," then puts her hand on his right cheek and kisses the left. "I liked the stubble," she says.

"Wasn't me either."

Anna drops her briefcase and flips through the mail. "Of course it was you, Josef. Who else could have done it?" Anna looks at him now, looks as if she wants to argue the point, but says, "You need to stop thinking about this."

"I wish everyone would stop thinking about it."

"If you did one interview, people would be satisfied." She drops the mail back in place and walks into the bedroom but keeps talking. "We're just curious."

Josef stays in the hallway. He's not that comfortable yet. "Did you say we?"

"Yes." He can hear the closet door slide open and slide shut. "We are curious about you."

"What's that mean?" Josef walks into the bedroom now. "Why are you curious about me?"

Anna's suit is lying nicely on the edge of the bed. She still has on the same blouse but is zipping up a pair of jeans. "It means, after seven weeks, I feel like I've barely cracked the surface of Josef Siebert."

Josef stays in the doorway and watches her change shirts. "You know plenty about me."

"Josef, honey, I know nothing about you. All I want—all anyone wants are a few more details." Fully changed, she kisses his cheek again and walks past him, into the hallway. Josef follows.

* * *

Early the next morning, he and Anna go downtown to the WMAQ station, where someone has deemed his interview an exclusive big enough to do live. While someone pats powder on his face, the reporter runs through her list of questions. "To avoid any surprises," she explains, and Josef struggles to answer them. How did he do what he did? He just

doesn't know. The reporter and Anna keep telling him to be more specific. He does what he can but knows it will never be enough.

Then they go to a room empty except for a large leather couch and matching chair that face each other. Josef sits on the couch, the reporter in the chair. She doesn't look anything like Josef thought she would over the phone, but he's never been good at that sort of thing. Anna stands next to the producer who stands next to the camera focused on Josef. It seems more like what he's always imagined a therapy session would be like. When the light on the camera goes green, Josef looks at Anna, who smiles back at him.

The reporter, looking into a different camera, starts with the basic story, the train, the old woman, the faulty scooter, the number of deaths on Chicago train tracks each year. Then she introduces Josef, "the modest hero of Ashland station." She looks at him now. "Did you ever imagine yourself as a hero?"

"Never," Josef says and wants it to be enough, but everyone—the reporter, the producer, even Anna, worst of all Anna—look at him as if he hasn't said anything. "I mean," he restarts, "how could I? I still don't know how I got here."

"What went through your mind as it was happening?"

Josef shakes his head. "Nothing. Really. I was on autopilot."

The reporter shuffles her notes quickly. "Do you think you were there in that exact spot at that exact time in order to save Mrs. Minski?"

Josef still doesn't know. He wishes he did. All he knows is that he has to say something. "The world is an ugly place," he begins. "It's accidents that make it so ugly. The universe was made by an accident and it's been producing accidents ever since. We tell ourselves we make our own decisions, but really we're just reacting to the latest accident. Most days I don't want to get out of bed for fear of what will happen. A woman saves money by buying her son over-sized shoes and he wears them to school and trips over empty toes and cracks his skull on a metal desk. An eighty-two year old grandmother insists on kneeling for the Holy Eucharist and breaks her hip. A teenager borrows the family car a week after getting his license and skids in the rain and gives an entire family neck injuries. A fifty-six year old father walks into the kitchen to get a beer and his heart explodes. A shy man trips on a stuffed animal while looking for a birthday present for his niece and knocks over a beautiful woman who's so nice she agrees to get coffee with him. This same man takes the green line train to have what he thinks will be the last meal of his relationship with this same woman. He normally takes the red line home. Because he is there, because he didn't weasel his way out of going to that dinner, he keeps an old woman from becoming another statistic. This shouldn't have happened at all, but it did. An accident precipitated by a lifetime of accidents. Some are just better than others. The good ones that happen so rarely are the only things that make the bad ones that happen so often bearable." As he speaks, surprising even himself, Josef ignores the others and looks at Anna. The smile she began the interview with is gone, but she doesn't look upset. She looks, Josef thinks, interested.

The Foundation of the Heart by Sung J. Woo

Akshil Chaudry, Employee of Dunkin' Donuts

There were two of them, a boy and a woman. He was bundled up in a shiny black coat and a red scarf, which the woman, whom I took to be his mother, adjusted as they waited in line.

Ahead of them was an older gentleman I'd serviced many times. He always wore a brown jumper and stopped by at the same time every weeknight. I was happy to be a part of his routine, putting together a Number 1 medium decaf, which is a 12-ounce coffee with a pump of cream and a heaping spoonful of sugar – plus a donut of choice.

“Glazed, sir?” I asked.

“Yes, thank you,” he said.

I know nothing of this man, but I do know which donut he likes. It's a funny thing, how you get to know a tiny bit about someone's life working behind this counter. If I were to ask his wife, a woman he has probably been married to for many decades, would she know what size coffee and what kind of donut her husband eats every night? It's possible she does, it's possible he has told her, but there is one thing certain: she does not see how his shoulders relax as he bites into that donut, or how he raises and drops his feet on the opposite seat in the rearmost booth after he takes his first sip of coffee.

“Good evening,” I said to the boy and his mother. The boy pulled off his woolen cap slowly, almost ceremoniously, to reveal his baldness, the skin of his bare head an unhealthy, chalky white.

“This isn't about you,” the mother told me.

And before I could ask her what she meant, the boy lifted the jar sitting in front of the cash register. To tell you the truth, I didn't even know what it was until it was stolen. I knew it was for a good cause, something about the foundation of the heart, but like anything else that you see every day, it disappears by way of familiarity.

“Wait!” I yelled. “Stop!”

But they did neither. The two people sitting at the tables had no chance to intervene, but there were two rowdy-looking teenagers – the exact kind of people I would expect to perform such a disgusting deed – coming in. And what did they do? They opened the door for them.

I have been working for a month at this Dunkin' Donuts, have been in this country for a month more. I live with my brother's family in Chester, thankful that I have left the unsafe neighborhood of my motherland, where my fellow Hindus were burning the houses and

businesses of Muslims in retaliation to their previous attacks, a stupid and dangerous war without end. But perhaps I was thankful too soon to be in this country.

Pete Hoagland, Senior at Bernardsville High

When I told my buddies about it later, well, first they thought I was bullshitting them, but then I showed them the police blotter in the local paper and they totally freaked.

Then I played it real cool, adding that Charlotte thought it was neat, too.

“Charlotte? You were with Charlotte Wong?”

I nodded slowly and threw in a slight shrug, like I go out with Charlotte all the time. Which I don’t; this was our first date. But it’s nice to be looked up to once in a while, and for the rest of the day, my friends were all like “You stud!” and everything that had gone wrong this year so far – getting cut from varsity soccer, almost failing bio, Cindy Marquette telling everyone that I kiss like a girl (I don’t) – none of that seemed too horrible.

Which is really kinda frightening, that one person can have such a huge effect on me. I know it’s emotionally unhealthy, I know I’m probably setting myself up for a serious heartbreak, but I guess that’s what being in love is all about.

She’s going through some really tough times. Her dad’s Dr. Wong, who’s like this big shot surgeon, and so far, she’s done everything that’s been asked of her. He wanted her to play the piano, so she learned to play. He was a tennis star in high school, and Charlotte went to state last year. He wanted her to attend Princeton like he did, so that’s where she’ll be next fall. Of course he wants her to go pre-med, and this is where Charlotte’s drawing the line.

“I don’t want to be my dad,” she said as we pulled into the parking lot of Dunkin’ Donuts. Sitting in the passenger seat and looking out into the night, she twirled her long, jet black hair.

“You won’t be like him,” I said, hoping she’d scoot over and put her head on my shoulder or something, anything. She was wearing a fuzzy pink sweater that hugged her body like a glove. I had to sit on my hands to keep myself from squeezing those perky tits of hers. They were like *right there*.

Before I did anything stupid, we got out of the car. Outside, it wasn’t freezing but plenty cold, so I offered Charlotte my jean jacket.

“You’re sweet,” she said, shutting the car door with a quick pitch of her hips. “I’m okay, thanks.”

As we walked up together to the brightly-lit entrance, I caught a glimpse of our reflection in the window. I wished we were holding hands.

Later that evening, I told the cops it was me who opened the door to Dunkin' Donuts and let the thieves escape, but actually it was Charlotte. And the next day during study hall, when she asked why I had lied, I told her.

"I wanted to protect you," I whispered. We both approached the donut shop at the same time, but it was Charlotte who lunged for the door handle, yanked on it, and stood back. Because it happened quickly and because she's thin and short while I'm wide and tall, the Indian guy behind the counter corroborated my version of the story to the cop.

Maybe it was wrong of me to assume responsibility for something I didn't do, but I did the best I could. Don't tell anybody this, but I have this mothering instinct built into me, a need to safeguard the ones I love. (This trait, by the way, is what led Cindy Marquette to brand me as a feminine kisser.) At that moment, when the cop was asking me what happened, I did what I thought was right.

"I opened the door," Charlotte said, loud enough that people looked in our direction.

"What's the big deal?" I said, and you should've seen the pitch-black darkness that descended on that sweet face of hers. Her upper lip curled, her canines telescoped into two-inch fangs, her eyes narrowed into thin strips of loathing.

"Didn't you hear one fucking word I said last night?"

And before I could even begin to assemble a reply, she left. I followed her, but of course she went into the only place I couldn't, the girls' bathroom.

And that was the end of our relationship, if you can even call it that. Now she won't even look at me.

My buddies tell me the usual bullshit, that it's that time of the month, they are all bitches, psycho chicks make no sense, stupid and useless crap like that. I just wanna know what I did that pissed her off. Even if things between me and her are screwed up forever, I'd like to know, you know, just for future reference.

Charlotte Wong, Senior at Bernardsville High

All I want is for the person to whom I'm telling my innermost thought to be listening and to recall them at extremely obvious moments. Why is this so hard?

It's hard because the person was only pretending to listen.

I have 20/10 eyesight, which might sound like I need glasses or contacts, but I don't. 20/10 means that an object twenty feet away is as clear to me as if it were only ten feet away. It's what gives me the edge in tennis, because I can see the ball much clearer than my opponents. That's why I was able to read what was written on the jar that the bald-headed boy was stealing at Dunkin' Donuts before Pete or anybody else. And that's why I helped

them escape.

Inside the jar, I counted a ten, two fives, and whorls of singles. A bed of silver and copper coins covered the bottom. Couldn't have been more than thirty, forty dollars at most.

On the jar, written in a red crayon font on the white label: The Children's Heart Foundation.

And Daddy Dearest is a heart surgeon.

Of course Pete doesn't possess my gifted eyesight, so when we sat down with our donuts and cups of coffee, I told him what I saw.

"Yeah?" he said, doing what was expected of him at this establishment, dunking his glazed donut into his coffee. He took a big, sloppy bite, dribbles of brown liquid spattering on the table. "The Heart Foundation. Yeah, that's cool, right?"

What bothered me most about Pete at that moment was the unmistakable element of fear in his voice, though at the time, I gave him the benefit of the doubt. I know he likes me and wanted to make a good impression on this so-called date, so perhaps it was just his shyness that I'd misread, but then when the cop came to write up his report, well, then I knew I'd been talking to no one but myself.

"I did it," he told Officer Fitch before I had a chance to tell the truth. "I opened the door." Then when the cop was busy jotting down on his notepad, Pete glanced over and gave me an almost imperceptible nod and a sliver of a smile, a combination of actions meant to convey his manly sacrifice for my benefit. If I had a donut, preferably a chocolate one since they're the densest, I would have flung it at his nose.

I'm beginning to realize that the best things in life happen when no thought is involved. That's what happened when I'd opened the door for those thieves – a pure reaction response, the heart bypassing the mind to achieve a purified truth. As I yanked on the blunt handle of the glass door, I was reminded of my last tennis match, when I sprinted to the net and exchanged four furious volleys with my nemesis, Natalie Brookmeyer of Ridge High. I nailed her in the stomach with the last shot.

Before the cop came into Dunkin' Donuts, I was composing my confession while Pete was getting me a blueberry muffin.

"I let them escape," I'd tell the officer, my eyes never leaving his.

"Are you saying that you're an accomplice?" he would say.

"That's right. I helped. And I'd do it again."

With luck, he would take me to the station for further questioning, which would have the added benefit of ending my terrible date with Pete, who should win, hands down, the

unofficial and uncoveted award given out by the yearbook staff, Most Boring Loser of 2003.

And just like that, my life would change. Once Princeton heard of my felonious act, they'd take away their early acceptance, and I would be freed from the shackles of legacy – and Daddy would have to find someone else to carry out his little dream, because I would be heading out to California. Out there, I would find a smoky bar with a worn-out piano to sing my songs of grief and loss, which I have plenty of. I've written four songs on the death of Mickey, our Persian cat, and another five on losing last year's state championship to Natalie Brookmeyer. For no reason at all, everyone will call me Charlie, and my life would, for the first time, be mine.

Detective Nate "Ducky" Hobart, Far Hills Police Department

There are twelve guys at the station, and of course, with my shitty luck, it's Fitch that takes the call.

It's my fault for lingering – after all, it is a donut shop, so it's not exactly a low traffic area for cops. I guess maybe I was just tired, which I have a full right to be after being on the force for twenty-nine years. This October is my thirtieth, and you can bet your sweet dollar that on the twenty-first day of that month, I'll be turning in my badge. I like my job, but I can't say I'll miss it. My buddies have already retired, so nobody calls me Ducky anymore, and for the last three years, I've had to deal with bozos like Fitch, pipsqueak assholes who quote from our Code of Ethics like it's the Holy Bible, words I myself wrote with Merlin McCandless when we broke away from Basking Ridge back in the summer of '64.

He didn't see me right away, which goes to show how green Fitch really is. I mean this is textbook stuff: the first thing an officer is supposed to do at a crime scene is take note of the people present in the area. But maybe I'm just old-fashioned. Maybe they teach things differently at the academy now. Maybe you're supposed to do a shitty job.

While Fitch was asking one useless question after another to both the Hindu guy behind the counter and the kid in the jean jacket, I suppose I could have left sight unseen, but I hate taking my cup of coffee and my Boston cream into the car. There was a time in my life when I enjoyed doing five things at the same time, but as I get older, I feel that slowing down is the only way to experience life, especially in this day and age of computers and the Internet. Now, I'm not one of those anti-technology people – I used the web to do all my Christmas shopping last December, even. I'm just saying there's more to living than hurrying from one place to another.

So there I was, two donuts and two-thirds of a Great One Brazilian Blend later when Fitch finally saw me.

"Detective Hobart? Have you been here all this time? Did you see what happened?"

I snorted at him and shook my head slowly, and before I even had a chance to tell him why I did not move from my booth, he started quoting the codes verbatim.

“...fundamental duty is to serve mankind. It’s our mission to safeguard lives and property; to protect the innocent against deception, the weak against oppression or intimidation, and the peaceful against violence or disorder...”

I said nothing, which really ticked him off.

“I know you’re not on duty, but Detective Hobart, we are police officers whether we wear the uniform or not. I’m afraid I’ll have to report this to Chief Zimmer.”

Which is how they handled it nowadays, tattletaling on each other like a bunch of little girls. Back in my day, we worked things out. We were a brotherhood. I told him to go shove one of those bow-tie donuts up his ass, loud enough for everyone to hear.

If Fitch had actually bothered to ask why I did nothing, I would’ve explained it like this:

The boy who stole the jar had no hair. Most likely, he’s a cancer patient.

The woman who accompanied him was probably his mother, and from the way they moved in and out quickly and without hesitation, the theft was entirely premeditated.

Something unjust happened to them, probably something to do with the boy’s treatment at the hospital or whatever facility he was at. I’m sure it had to do with money; everything, at some point, has to do with money. In order to right this wrong, they took a shortcut. They took what they believed belonged to them.

The problem with this theory is that the jar was for the Children’s Heart Foundation, not cancer. It’s possible that they screwed up in their anger, but I don’t think so. There’s something else at work here, especially considering that they had help in their escape. Because it wasn’t the boy in the jean jacket who opened the door, it was the girl he was with, and she was more than glad to let them out.

Indeed, a crime had been committed, and for a second I did consider going after the mother-and-son team of thieves, but an old familiar feeling changed my mind. I guess you can call it my cop instinct, which all good ones have. Mike DeFazio, my partner for fifteen years, felt an itch on his left earlobe whenever something didn’t seem right. I feel it on my fingertips, a tickly tingle when it’s okay, a kind of a numbness when it’s not. This one was, without a doubt, a tickly tingle.

So there you go. There was something very justified about the whole scene, so I turned back to the wonderful task waiting in front of me: chasing a cream-filled bite of my donut with a sweet sip of coffee.

Bart LeClaire, Mechanic at Superauto Express

The next day, as I was replacing the timing belt on Mrs. Honeycutt’s silver Accord – it was

time for her 120K service, those Hondas run forever – I kept seeing the two of them over again, the bald boy and his mother. From where I had been sitting, at the far end of the restaurant, I saw them as they ran for the door, the boy wrapping his arms around the jar, the change inside jingling like a tambourine with every bounding step.

I wanted to know what the woman had told the nice Indian fellow before her son took the jar, so when Officer Fitch came to question everyone, I eavesdropped.

“‘This isn’t about you?’ That’s what she said?”

“That is correct,” Akhil said. I’ve never called him by his name; I know it because that’s what his name tag says.

“Why would she say that?”

“I don’t know,” Akhil said, looking confused. “Is that not your job to find out?”

It was indeed a strange thing to say, but it said a lot about the woman. They could have just taken the donation jar without saying anything. Those were honest words, brave words, words I wish I could hear myself say.

Days passed, days like many others at the shop, replacing burnt-out sparks with new ones, flushing the darkened anti-freeze out of a radiator and filling it back up with a fresh stream of neon green, and each day, I found myself returning to the scene at Dunkin’ Donuts. At some point, though, my memory of that evening turned into my own fantasy, one where it was I who had spoken those words, I who had grabbed the jar, I who had sprinted for the exit.

And why not? Why shouldn’t it be me? Why is it that in the fifty-three years I have lived on this planet, I can’t recall a single meaningful moment like that?

The answer is simple: fear. Fear is what has kept me in this despicable job all these years. I never wanted to be a mechanic, but because of my cowardice, I’ve been forced into a life of surrenders: a woman I never wanted to marry but married, kids I never wanted to have but had, a house I never wanted to buy but bought. Had I possessed the brave heart of this woman, I could’ve been somebody. Exactly whom, I’m not sure, but that’s beside the point.

It’s never too late, people say, but that’s nothing but ridiculous optimism. I have children to send to college, a wife to support, mortgage payments to make. I was sentenced a long time ago to this life of mine, and there won’t be any early paroles.

Still, I have hope, foolish, stupid hope, and that’s why last night I drove to the Dunkin’ Donuts next town over. Like the one I frequent, this one also had a donation jar sitting in front of the register, gleaming under the bright fluorescent lights. A little blond boy and a golden retriever were on the label of the jar, along with the words American Humane.

I was fourth in line, and as I waited my turn, I considered what I was about to do. I have

been driving a car for more than thirty years, and in all that time, never have I received a single ticket, not even one for parking. The other mechanics in our shop complain all the time, but I say nothing, even when I haven't gotten a pay raise in over two years.

"Hi," the girl behind the counter said. "How can I help you?" She was a young thing, probably a high schooler, trying to earn some cash to go to the movies or buy some clothes.

"This is about me," I said, and reached for the jar. I grabbed it with my hands and turned, but I couldn't move it. When I looked down more carefully, I saw the long screws coming up from the bottom of the jar, screws that held it steadfast to the counter.

"I'm sorry," the girl said, oblivious to my attempted theft, the register blocking her view. I looked behind me and saw no one there. There wasn't even anyone sitting down. It was like none of it happened. "Did you say you wanted a Number 1?"

"Yes," I said. I ordered a Number 1. Medium coffee with cream and sugar. A glazed donut. I took them to the booth farthest away from the counter and sat down facing the window. After the first sip, I put my feet up.

Nancy Franco, Mother of Mary Franco

When I told her *she* had to take the jar, Mary made no complaints, just nodded.

Of course I wanted to do it for her, like any other parent who wants to help her child. I didn't even want her there, but the point was not to steal a stupid donation jar. The point was to empower my daughter to take back what was rightfully hers.

She's lost everything else, even the fact that she's a girl. Last week, the lady sitting next to us on the bus whispered in my ear, "Your son will be just fine." Then she continued in her all-knowing, all-wise voice, "My nephew had cancer, and you should see him now. He's playing Little League and he's a boy scout, too."

I said nothing, just got up at our stop and walked back to our apartment. The woman accepted my brusqueness, of course. Everybody understands, which is bullshit. Nobody understands, not unless it's happening to them.

If I didn't go to my support meeting every Wednesday, I'd lose my mind. When I told them of our adventure at Dunkin' Donuts, everybody laughed. Mickey, whose seven-year-old son will probably not live long enough to see another Christmas, said that next time, I should do a better job than to pick a donut shop to commit an illegal act. "That's like starting a fire in a firehouse, isn't it?"

I suppose. I admit I wasn't thinking too clearly after coming back from the conference, my rage getting the better of me, but still, I had the presence of mind to remember that the Dunkin' Donuts at the corner of Route 202 and Lamington Road had what would give my daughter a symbolic victory. Mary's arms were wrapped around the clear plastic jar the whole

car ride back, and I felt sorry for her, for having a mother who could do nothing but pull stunts like this.

My daughter turned eleven last month. I can't even remember what my life was like when I was her age. I went to school, I played with friends, I watched television. I ate, I slept, I awoke. I'm sure I thought about my own mortality at eleven – everybody does when they're young because it's such a mystery. Death exists everywhere: a swatted fly stuck on the window pane, a flattened worm oozing onto the sidewalk, a still-eyed deer angled askew on the side of the road. Most children have the luxury of imagining their own death at this point, something brimming with melodrama, a long fall from the highest mountain, a fatal shot to the heart, a sip of deadly poison.

Mary's vision of her own death requires no such hyperactive imagination. All she needs to do is extrapolate the weakness she feels at night, lie down in the dark with this tiredness, and think that this time, her sleep might never end.

It was my fault, though Dr. Moya says I'm being too hard on myself. Even if I had made it to the conference on time, it would've done little good. Dr. Moya had made his case for the research budget, did his best to get as much of the twenty million dollars toward his experimental treatment of leukemia, but this other doctor, this fucking Dr. Wong, he was a piece of work.

"He had the votes of half the committee before he even set foot on that stage," Dr. Moya told me. "If you want to blame anyone, Nancy, blame me. I underestimated my opponent, not you."

That may be true, Dr. Moya, but I bet Dr. Wong didn't see this one coming. This morning Mary and I emptied the jar into a Ziploc and we walked to the 7-Eleven at the corner of our street. She deposited almost forty-five dollars into the Jimmy Fund can herself, sliding every last penny into the slot until there was nothing left.

Glutton by Jennifer Yee

“Because someone will adore me when my ribs show clearly and I’m thin even when I sit down.” – *Fatso*, Jonatha Brooke

“Is anyone here allergic to bananas, latex, or chocolate frosting?”

I don’t tell Sam that my nose bleeds when I eat chocolate because I don’t think that the frosting is for eating.

* * *

Sixteenth Street and Fourth Avenue. This must be the building. It’s flanked by a boarded and chained construction site and an intersection. It’s rare to run into someone you recognize in Manhattan, but I take a quick look around me, anyway. The tags next to the buzzer buttons are barely legible and the intercom seems grimy. “Malcontent Productions,” I press the button with my knuckle and hold my breath.

“Yes, Malcontent Productions.”

“Uh, my name is Jane, Kelly Anders is supposed to show me around and talk to me. She’s expecting me.” My voice is cracking. “I tried to call her cell but she didn’t answer. Yeah, um, Jane. I’m Jane. She said, well, Kelly did, to be here at seven, I’m supposed to meet her, she said to call up.”

“One moment.”

This feels like a mistake. I sound like someone caught in a lie. But strangely enough, I’m not lying at all.

“Kelly will meet you on the sixth floor, wait for her at the door. Take the elevator.”

The elevator is stifling hot. I remove my down-filled puffy coat and try to fold it under my arm. I don’t know if wearing jeans and a Gap v-neck sweater to a dungeon is inappropriate. My sneakers squeak loudly as I shift from one foot to the other, tugging my jeans below my bellybutton. Sam gave me Kelly’s phone number. Kelly has arranged it so I can visit the dungeon to do research for the play. For my role.

It is a Wednesday night in November, but I thought Kelly would be wearing less, or maybe I expected head-to-toe leather. Her black tights hang so low that I can see the white cotton crotch below the hem of her short, plaid skirt. Her vintage Strawberry Shortcake t-shirt is ragged and strains across her chest.

* * *

Elise, my high school ballet teacher, looked like a very thin, delicate owl. Her jet-black hair was always tightly bound, which caused her round, heavily lidded eyes to bulge. She always wore a flowered chiffon ballet skirt wrapped securely around her waist. She was half my height and a quarter of my weight. When she spoke, her head bobbed slightly, like a traditional Japanese puppet, or maybe it was a hint of her age.

When I was en pointe at the ballet barre she would thrust out her two index fingers then swiftly place the tips of her manicured talons under the full crescents of my cheeks and push. Precision. Balance. Grace.

* * *

Sam is screaming at us again. Sam is slender, pale, and utterly androgynous. I stand here in four-inch stilettos with my hands clasped behind my back. The top of Sam's blue-spiked head would barely reach my chest. Sam glares make me tuck my chin to my chest like a napping bird. Sam says we are going to fuck up the show. Sam says we should do it again but this time, for god's sake, do something different. We are rehearsing the nightmare sequence. The characters are interpreting the psychological entrapment of their eating disorders in a physical manifestation. The rehearsal started with Sam having us run silently in a circle, barefoot on the wooden flooring. As a synchronized group we were to complete two jumps, a hop, two changes of direction, and a complete stop without speaking to each other or making eye contact or hand signals. Sam had us run for thirty-five minutes. The results were disappointing.

The Cheerleader has been rolling on the floor pantomiming that she's trapped in a giant grapefruit, it meets Sam's approval. I strut up to a rounded beam embedded in the wall and lick it, making circles with my tongue. I grind against it, treating it like an oversized stripper's pole, an impenetrable phallus. Sam doesn't notice.

* * *

Mr. John, my ballet teacher from age four to fourteen didn't remember my name until I was nine. If he criticized you, then he had been paying attention to you. If he didn't say anything bad to you, he probably didn't know you were there. He had his favorites. I was elated for weeks when he walked by me at the barre and gave me a rare grin and an approving pat on the cheek.

I was always being told to keep my butt and stomach held in tight.

Most of the girls in my class were Asian, all of them petite. We were in the "blue" class; we all wore the same color and style of leotard. There was only one boy in our class.

The one time I was singled out first was the day we were practicing lifts. Mr. John said to the boy that it was like lifting weights. Heaviest to lightest. I was picked first.

* * *

Kelly greets me with a warm hug and invites me into the lounge to put down my backpack and coat. I try to tuck my massive coat around my bag and shove them into an empty corner while Kelly introduces me to “the girls.” A short blond is wearing lacy lingerie and a worn-out terry cloth robe, a very large Black girl is wearing tight denim cutoffs and a vinyl bra, a Spanish girl with mild acne and frizzy brown curls is lying on the sofa in an oversized t-shirt, a thong and “fuck me heels.” A large-busted brunette with cornrows is seated in front of a mirror plucking her eyebrows. A girl with a nose piercing and long acrylic nails and another girl with a she-devil tattooed on her calf are sitting in front of a small T.V. watching the movie *Carrie*. It is still early, most of the girls don’t have appointments, they are simply on-call. Kelly gracefully extends her arm, palm up, like those girls on *The Price is Right* and introduces me to each of the girls in turn. They all say hello. They call me “honey.”

We walk out of the lounge and pass a balding man wearing a studded dog collar, his head is bowed as he fixes a cabinet. Kelly tells me not to pay attention to him. He’s a house slave. He works for them for free, and Kelly tells me that if he is good, then he is rewarded with a little “playtime.”

“He likes being disciplined,” Kelly says.

She warns me that if I meet the head mistress, Mistress Mallory, that she might try to recruit me because they don’t have any Asian mistresses, and they are very popular. She assures me that Mistress Mallory has given me approval to visit, and that she is both an intelligent businesswoman and a kind person.

Kelly introduces me to Layla, a very tall, thin Black woman wearing designer jeans and silver hoop earrings. Her hair and make-up are dramatic but impeccable. I try to unobtrusively scrape the dry skin off my lip with my teeth. When Layla leaves, Kelly whispers to me that Layla is always to be referred to as a “she.”

“She wasn’t born a female, but she is. She has tits and a cunt,” Kelly says waving her hand in front of her own crotch.

“She’s a ‘she.’ Clients know that she’s a T.S. but they also know to call her a ‘she.’ She has tits and a thing.”

* * *

I thought that I was in trouble once. I thought about it over and over again, but it wasn’t so bad. It did hurt. I was crying by myself in the bathroom wondering what to do. I was worried about bleeding to death. It must have looked like so much more blood than it actually was because of the water. Then I wondered how it died, technically speaking. Suffocation? Drowning? It was over. I poured half a bottle of Clorox down the toilet to get rid of the smell. I didn’t bother to cancel the appointment I had made earlier in the week. Let them think I just changed my mind. I should have gone to the emergency room, though. But eventually I was fine.

* * *

Kelly leads me into the first room, the “medical” room. The lighting inside is dim. She closes the door then flips a switch. There’s no change in the lighting. The switch controls a red light outside the door that indicates that the room is occupied. There is a large metal tub in the back of the room, a dentist’s chair, a metal cart and tray for tools and an operating table. She says this room is very popular. She drapes a stethoscope around her neck, sticks out her hip and says “naughty nurse.” We stand next to the operating table. She shows me nipple prongs, snapping them in the air and twisting them vigorously. Clips, “to be used on various parts of the body,” Kelly explains. Leather restraints and a variety of paddles are displayed.

“We are very safe. The rooms are sterilized after each use and anything that gets blood on it we throw out. No exceptions. Toss it.”

Kelly bounces in her stockinged feet from room to room and shows me torture wheels, racks and chains, she poses next to each like Vanna White. The rooms are empty except for the equipment. It is a dark carnival.

* * *

The Angel drapes her sparkling wings on the Skeleton’s outstretched arms. Shirley Temple jumppropes with the trailer-park Transvestite using a tape measure. The Cheerleader and the Athlete stuff cookies into their mouths. The Dominatrix and the Beauty Queen tango. This is a play. The characters stop their odd behaviors and break apart. They begin their endless purging cycles all over again. Floor-to-ceiling mirrors are wheeled out and each character prods, vomits, pulls, grimaces, screams, dies at the sight of herself. Sit-ups. Jogging. Vomiting. Leg lifts. Endless monologues about self-hatred, self-abuse.

Sam is not satisfied.

“Again,” Sam says. Disgust.

* * *

“Actually, it’s really cool to work here.” Kelly says. “Of course you have to be into it, but we all do it recreationally. It’s one of the few establishments completely managed by women. Mistress only hires girls with training. You’re not allowed to do strictly domination, either, you must work as a submissive, as well. And of course we have playtime together. We wrestle each other and do scenes. We’re all very close.”

* * *

There were times when I wandered around Manhattan for hours, lost. I didn’t ask for help, because I wouldn’t want people to ever think I was ever uncertain. There were times when I would walk quickly past grocery stores or restaurants, because I wouldn’t want people to think I ever ate any food. There were times when I waited until class was over to

run to the bathroom, because I wouldn't want people to think I ever needed to urinate. There were times when I wouldn't say a single word.

* * *

We are going to find a place to sit down and talk. As we approach the last room she tells me it is haunted. I snort. It's a narrow room with a soundproof isolation chamber by the door and an interrogation chair with a floor lamp on the far side. She turns on the red light and closes the door. Kelly has me sit in the interrogation chair. She shines the lamp in my eyes and turns off the room lights. I see hot white.

"I get inside their heads. I figure out what makes them tick, why they are here. Eventually they can't see me, they don't know where I am or what I'm going to do to them."

Kelly turns on the lights. She opens the isolation chamber, it is tall and narrow. There is a wooden stool inside.

"One of the other girls and I, we're sort of lovers sometimes, we were playing and got someone else to straightjacket and blindfold us and lock us in here. We fell asleep and the girl who put us in here forgot to come and get us out. We were in here for at least two hours. It wasn't what we were expecting, but it was an awesome experience. We were so drained afterward."

Kelly promises me that she'll let me out right away and won't even lock the door. I step inside and sit down. The total isolation and panicked silence inside my head is frightening.

* * *

My ex-boyfriend Ric forced me to have sex with him in his roommate's closet. He pinned one of my legs over my shoulder with his arm. I tried to keep my ass off the gritty carpet but he kept shoving me down. He was convinced I was going to have an orgasm, he told me so. I was hyperventilating because I was afraid his erratic pushing was going to dislocate my shoulder or break my leg. His roommate came home with friends. Ric let my leg slam back down to the floor. He pulled on his boxer shorts and walked out the door. The whole time I lay there twisted, sweaty, and fazed on the floor.

* * *

Kelly explains the intricacies of domination to me. There is a glow in her eyes, but her tone is serious. Her intensity is mesmerizing.

"Sometimes I'll be doing a scene and the client and I will make eye contact. I can see the fear and trust in their eyes at the same time. It's an incredible connection. I will look at them for that split second then shove their head down or slap him. He has to ask permission. They are not allowed to touch me unless I let them. Sometimes I let them lick my shoes. It's all about trust and letting go."

* * *

I went to this nightclub called “Tunnel.” Supposedly you have to pee standing up because there aren’t any toilets, only a guy in a wetsuit who sits in a bathtub.

Some guy kept grinding up against the back of me. He dug his fingers into the grooves that nest my crotch and jizzed all over the back of my leg.

I stayed in the shower until my skin was red and my digits were wrinkled. Little flaccid dicks.

* * *

Once I was called to fill-in at a ballet performance, one of the dancers had sprained her ankle. I was an understudy. They were dancing Giselle. I rushed into the dressing room and all the girls applauded. I threw down my bag and sat down to get fixed-up. They were all dressed in their costumes, white embroidered leotards and filmy white skirts. Their black hair, they were all Asian, was pulled back into low buns at the nape of the neck. They powdered my arms and face with baby powder, we were all supposed to be ghosts. Maiden ghosts, undoubtedly. We covered our shoes with liquid foundation make-up to achieve a uniformly clean look.

* * *

I had a one-night-stand by accident. He told me the morning after we had sex that he hadn’t intended to have sex with me. This was after he twisted and rammed his knuckles into my clit while saying, “c’mon, c’mon,” as if he were waiting for my engine to turn over. After claiming that he didn’t mean to have sex with me the night before (he did though), he cajoled me into taking a shower with him. “Nothing will happen. I promise.” He bent me over, pinning my wrists against the edge of the tub and fucked me. All I could see were my hands clenching porcelain. Then he withdrew, spraying it between my feet.

* * *

Ric and I were in the dorm room bathroom this time. He was much shorter than me and couldn’t figure out how to stick me. I was sore and dry, as usual. Kneeling naked on sticky tiles the lingering taste of latex made me gag. My hand wasn’t enough. He turned his back on me and quickly jerked himself clean into the open toilet. He washed his hands while I searched for my underwear. I got dressed and started to smooth my hair with water.

“Don’t be gross. Wash your fucking hands first,” Ric said, walking out the bathroom door.

* * *

I was wrong, I did have to eat the frosting. The other characters in the show are hunched like vultures in Halloween costumes over the remains of a chocolate cake that was mauled in previous scene. I smear frosting on the neck of the Skeleton. She has a piece of duct tape on her mouth. I slowly lick the frosting off her skin. My hands never touch her body.

* * *

Matthieu was several slim milk-white snakes that held me down, manipulated me, twiddled and invaded. It was usually over in a few seconds. Those few seconds felt like a black hole. I faced the wall so I wouldn't have to see his fishbelly white skin pulled over his sculpted feminine bones. I stared at the photos of him with his lanky ex-girlfriend. They covered the wall, bed to ceiling. He always apologized for his lack of endurance with a mumbled French idiocy.

* * *

Since I was about eight years old I couldn't wait to be home alone. I'd sneak into the kitchen (I was afraid someone would see me through the hedge, dusty screens, and clouded window) and I'd open the refrigerator and start. I'd scoop fistfuls of food into my mouth. Cold bread and butter scraped off in chunks, juice, spoonfuls of peanut butter, hidden holiday candies, cheese, fingers of mayonnaise, leftover pasta, ice cream, anything that I could swallow down. It would catch up to me. I'd try to distract myself by hiding in bed hoping to fall asleep, or reading and pretending I was someone else, somewhere else. I'd try to crap it all out. I learned what to do when I was older.

* * *

I couldn't taste the food. I only remembered the stomachaches and the strain of trying to get rid of my mistake. I couldn't feel the sex. Freshman year in college I stopped eating and started having sex. For a year my lower body was constantly aching.

* * *

I don't even have to grab the rim of the toilet bowl anymore for support. I simply kneel and do it. My eyeballs feel like they're blushing hard, then they are suddenly cool and wet and my stomach clenches sending stinging waves of pinpricks up my esophagus. Water splashes up on my face when the chunks hit the surface. Choking, growling, and spitting to get rid of the burn, the residue. When it is over I start crying, "I'll never do it again," as I clean my mouth and face before I look up into the mirror. I have said these words so many times before.

* * *

I crawl across the stage trying not to snag my fishnet stockings on a splinter or lose one of my stilettos. I pause in the center stage spotlight to arch my back and stick my ass high in the air when I say the line about starring in a personal porn video. Sam always screamed at me if I didn't thrust my ass on the word "porn." Precision. This monologue is about my character's obsession with masturbation, self-gratification, self-abuse. I have said these words so many times before.

I feel eyes all over me, the other characters in back of me, the audience just a few feet in front. My hands roam strategically and they clench my own flesh as I say the words and go through the motions. Kneeling on the floor, I scream and moan and buck and writhe in a

fake climax. Slowly I settle back onto my heels forcing a look of serene satisfaction onto my face as I feel the points of the heels pushing up under the crescents of my cheeks. Balance. It's all about trust and letting go, I have said these words so many times before, I'll never do it again. Grace.

nonfiction

China: Visiting Rites by Stephen Greenblatt

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The academic delegation that met me at Beijing Airport at the start of my six-week stay in the People's Republic of China was like the bomber crew in a World War II movie: each chosen to embody a significant group in the great collective enterprise. But where the choices in the American movie were ethnic – an Irish gunner, an Italian navigator, and so forth – the Chinese choices were generational. The senior member of the delegation both in age and authority – was Zhang Wen-Xiang, a dignified Shakespeare scholar in his late sixties, with close-cropped gray hair, elegant features, and exquisite, Oxford-accented English. Next to him, waving enthusiastically as I came through customs, stood Liu Jing-Lian (“Sounds like ‘Jingle’ – ‘Jingle Bells,’” he said), in his late forties, thin enough for his belt to lap around him twice and in a perpetual state of harried excitement and anxiety. Liu had just returned from two years in the United States as a visiting professor, and spoke rapid, idiomatic American English, laced with occasional Anglicisms that were the legacy of his original training (“My dear fellow, be careful not to be ripped off”). Half-hidden behind Liu was a third greeter, Wu Zi-Teng, about thirty, solidly built, with a broken nose, a ready laugh, and – though he too was a member of the English Department at Beijing University – very shaky English. He was introduced to me as Xiao Wu, “Little Wu.”

There was a fourth person who had come to the airport to fetch me: the taxi driver. He was missing several teeth, spoke no English, and seemed irritated that his May Day was being wasted in this way. Or so at least I interpreted his mad, incessant honking at anything and nothing in particular – a bicyclist 50 yards away, a donkey cart on the other side of the road, a peasant pulling a nightsoil wagon – until I realized that all Chinese drivers keep a heavy hand on the horn.

As we drove along, we reviewed the terms of my visit: over the next three weeks, I would give six lectures to the faculty and students in the English Department at Beijing University. Four of the lectures would be on Shakespeare, two on contemporary American literature; I could also conduct several informal seminars. Most of the lectures would be in the evening, so that I would have plenty of time to poke around Beijing or take side trips, and I could have a car and driver whenever I wished. My audience would be most interested in current trends in criticism and literature. The Cultural Revolution had brought education to a halt for ten years, and it was time now to catch up in every field. There would be no need for a translator, for I would be lecturing to advanced students and to faculty; the problem would not be proficiency in language, but accessibility of ideas.

The car turned in through a gate, past a bayonet-bearing soldier. “Is this Beijing University?” “No,” said Liu, “This is the Friendship Hotel where you will be staying.” But I had been told that I would be staying on the campus of the university where I could easily see students and faculty informally. “This is much nicer; you’ll be more comfortable here.”

“I’d rather be on the campus.”

“Here you have two rooms and a private bath; you'll be more comfortable.”

“I don't mind staying in one room. On the campus it will be easy to meet people. Isn't the Friendship Hotel a place where Chinese visitors have to sign in at the gate?”

“Yes, but here you will have a TV in your room.”

“Oh, that doesn't matter, I don't watch much TV at home.”

“Here you'll be more comfortable.”

Xiao Wu looked around my rooms at the Friendship Hotel with an admiration I later came to understand; he and his wife lived on the campus in a room less than half the size of my sitting room. They did their cooking on a tiny charcoal brazier outside their door, and shared a toilet and shower with dozens of others on their long corridor. Zhang and Liu knew that American academics lived like princes, and they glanced about with the complacent assurance that these accommodations could not be *vastly* below my expectations. The four of us sat in overstuffed armchairs and sipped tea.

In the late afternoon, after the three had left, I decided to go out for a walk. I passed three white-jacketed attendants refilling the large thermoses provided in each room for tea, two other attendants sorting out the laundry, an attendant in charge of the keys, three desk clerks, and two doormen: I was now out not of the hotel but only of my building, one of a dozen or more in the enormous complex built by the Russians in the 1950s to house “Foreign Experts.” Then past the infirmary, the tennis courts, the swimming pool (not open until the official start of summer, June 1, though it was already searingly hot), the dining hall, the taxi office, the guard house, the gatehouse, the soldier again – and finally I was out on the street. I saw now more clearly what I had glimpsed through the curtained windows of the taxi: I was in the middle of an enormous suburb of huge apartment blocks, small factories, and nondescript building sites. A few streets away were several tiny shops with a handful of people squatting outside them on the dirt sidewalk selling peanuts, pumpkin seeds, and garlic shoots. No other street life was visible. I came to what appeared to be a pleasant park, but when I tried to walk through the gate I was stopped. In my halting Chinese – the fruit of three months of cramming – I asked to enter and was refused. This was People's University, and I needed special permission to visit. As I walked away, a young man came up to me, his face already betraying the effort to form an English sentence:

“Is this your first visit to China?”

I told him it was; he was pleased. He smiled and said, “Welcome to our factory!”

Next morning, in the company of Liu, I went off for some sight-seeing; once again we had a driver and official car, this time a large black Warszawa. The car, honking steadily, pulled rapidly out of the Friendship Hotel and forced two women off their bicycles, scattering their belongings. The women cursed; the driver laughed. In a country without private cars, riding around in the back of a Warszawa makes one feel like an eighteenth-

century French nobleman running his carriage through the crowds or, alternatively, like the Pope. Neither role suited me. Buses were preferable, but they are astonishingly crowded, and in boarding them the normally disciplined Chinese release an impressively anarchic spirit. (Zhang said that manners had deteriorated under the Gang of Four; the one TV show I watched, however, tried to blame the problem on Western corruption. The pushers and shovers on the screen all wore bell-bottom trousers and leather jackets.)

The solution to getting around Beijing is a bicycle, and when I managed to borrow one for the duration of my stay, my sense of the city was entirely transformed. The endless sprawl of half-finished construction – for Beijing has grown from six million to ten million inhabitants in little more than a decade – was less numbing when viewed from the midst of a stream of thousands of bicyclists; I could easily pedal around blocks of factories and put together like a puzzle multiple glimpses of the former temples that now housed the machinery; the obsessive thoroughness with which almost everything in the city is walled no longer seemed so daunting; most important, it was simple now to get off the main streets and into the tiny *hutongs*, or alleys, that run between the low gray courtyard houses with their graceful tiled roofs, ornamented doorposts, and quiet interiors. Even with eight families to a courtyard, there are too many people in Beijing for one-story housing, and these structures are rapidly being ripped down and replaced with large ugly apartment blocks. But for the moment there are still great networks of *hutongs*, and even in their dilapidated state, with piles of rubble by the walls and the courtyards half-filled with brick sheds jerry-built to accommodate the swelling populations, the old houses have an austere beauty intensified by the major aesthetic principle of contemporary Beijing: sensory deprivation.

A week after my arrival, I had lunch in a traditional courtyard house with Lin Zhi-Xiao, an old and distinguished novelist to whom I had been given an introduction by an American friend. Situated near the back gate of the Imperial Palace, this complex of courtyards had been built in the last century by one of the Empress Dowager's eunuchs. Lin had bought the house before Liberation and had raised his children there, but during the Cultural Revolution the Red Guards occupied the courtyard, confined Lin and his wife to a single, small room, and moved in several poor families. In the last few years there have been major government efforts to restore losses suffered during the years of upheaval, but it is politically and socially impossible to relocate the poor. Still, Lin and his wife have managed to recover several rooms, and I had already seen enough to know that by Chinese standards this was an exceptionally spacious apartment: a handsome living room with fine old cabinets packed with books, a carved wooden sofa, separate tables for eating and conversation, plus a narrow kitchen, a small bedroom, even a tiny study.

Lin had lived in England in the late thirties and forties; he had known Leonard and Virginia Woolf and others in Bloomsbury; he was suave, urbane, steeped in Western culture. Despite his perfectly orthodox politics, he was an obvious target for the xenophobic Red Guards. I asked him how he had managed to keep his belongings through the Cultural Revolution. He had taken the furniture apart, he replied, and hidden it away, along with his books, in a space between two walls. Some things, however, had been too dangerous to keep: he had burned the manuscripts of four novels. “No point in keeping them, no point at all.”

Over a long, wonderful lunch – shrimp with peanuts, cold meats, “thousand-year-old eggs,” pork with garlic shoots, and a delicious “river duck” that stared at me mournfully from the plate – Lin and I had a wide-ranging conversation, from his recollections of childhood and of the Woolfs, to contemporary American and Chinese culture, from modern painting to international politics. Like many Chinese I met, Lin was supremely gracious, witty, even intimate; I felt we were speaking utterly frankly. Yet as the afternoon wore on, I had an odd feeling which I was to experience several other times in China: a feeling that this moving and convincing intimacy was an elegant conjuring trick. Lin would lean forward and tell me, in confidential tones, things that I knew were utterly conventional, so that I began to lose touch with the markers by which we normally define the boundary between authenticity and illusion.

Uneasy, I told Lin two stories that I had heard during the past week. I carefully altered the names and precise circumstances, as I am doing right now, and I realized that I myself was beginning to replicate the calculated and illusory frankness that was making me uneasy.

The first story involved a young Chinese scientist whom I had met through an American friend teaching at a Beijing research institute. My friend told this scientist that the new and extremely expensive piece of equipment his unit had just purchased was hopelessly difficult to maintain, and, moreover, that all the important work to be done on it had already been done. The scientist said he knew this very well himself, but that the equipment had been ordered by the head of the unit, and consequently there had been no way to stop the decision, or even to argue strenuously against it. Their budget would now be exhausted for years, and they would go through the motions of pointless research.

The second story involved a young academic who had been working for three years on a linguistics project and then had been transferred, on a day's notice and without the possibility of appeal, to an entirely different project, the compiling of a dictionary. At first he hated the project, but gradually, over a year and a half, he had developed, almost in spite of himself, an interest in the intellectual problems raised by the dictionary. Then quite suddenly he was told that a teacher was needed at a new institute, and he was again transferred. This time, he said bitterly, he would no longer commit himself – he would only do what the job absolutely demanded and nothing more. He was “finished.”

Lin sighed, “These stories are true; such things do happen, and frequently at that.” Then bending toward me and lowering his voice: “What we need to do is to replace the old cadres with new, bright, up-to-date cadres.” The idea was scarcely surprising; I had read it two days before in a speech by Premier Deng, duly reprinted in *China Daily*. I observed that even if such replacement were carried out (itself extremely difficult), it would leave the basic structure of things entirely intact, and young cadres before too long would become old cadres. “What we need,” Lin repeated, “are younger cadres.”

Perhaps this is what he actually believed, just as he may even have believed that Contemporary Chinese literature was, as he said, “wonderful and exciting.” And even if he believed otherwise, what right had I to expect that he would say so to me? It was not his caution – if that is what it was – that surprised me, but his exquisite miming of candor.

In the midst of this perfect courtesy – the consummate achievement of those whom the Chinese are said to call “barbarian handler” – I found myself longing, perversely perhaps, to break through to something clear and unequivocal. Once on a visit to Datong, a bleak, coal-mining town on the Mongolian border where there are ancient and remarkably beautiful Buddhist rock carvings, I allowed this longing to get the better of me. I had gone to the Public Security Office to request permission to climb Wu Tai Shan, a Buddhist holy mountain. (I had earlier received permission to climb Tai Shan, a sacred peak in Shandong Province, and so I did not anticipate problems.)

“Wu Tai Shan is too far away,” I was told by the cadre. “It's difficult to reach by train or bus.”

“That's okay; I'll hire a taxi.”

“But there is no place to stay on the top of Wu Tai Shan.”

“I don't intend to climb to the top, and I'll have the taxi take me back to Datong.”

“But there are no restaurants on Wu Tai Shan.”

“I'll carry food with me.”

“But there are only three monasteries open on Wu Tai Shan.”

“I'll look at those and then enjoy the scenery.”

“Wu Tai Shari is closed to foreigners.”

What had I accomplished by not stopping at the first polite answer? After that experience I resolved to content myself with indirection, but the irritable reaching after unequivocal truths was difficult to suppress.

“What interests you most about the study of Shakespeare?” I asked an assistant professor who had written his dissertation on the comedies.

“The universal values.”

“Which universal values?”

“Those everywhere expressed in Shakespeare's plays.”

“But why did you choose to study Shakespeare in particular?”

“I was assigned to study him.”

Assigned. This is not, one must understand, said casually; the assignments are major life decisions that remain in force indefinitely – until the next assignment. Perhaps this partly

explains the craving for nameless universal values; it does not matter what you study if you always find the same thing.

But do Chinese scholars always find the same thing? “Do you never feel the distance, the foreignness, of your subject?” I asked Qin You-Shi, a strange, sardonic, brilliant young professor.

“I had wanted to study phonetics,” he replied, “but there was no room for me. When I was assigned to study Shakespeare, I felt at first like a young woman who has been married against her will to a hideous old man; at first she bemoans her fate, but gradually she becomes accustomed to it.”

Zhang laughed when Qin made his remark and said that the analogy was absurd. But how did he, I asked, deal with the distance between Shakespeare and Chinese culture? After all, he had earlier complained that Americans were obsessed with sex and violence. True enough, but these obsessions, I suggested, are neither new nor exclusively American; they are already articulated in Shakespeare's plays which Zhang too professed to admire for their universal values. “What do you do,” I asked, “with all those moments in Shakespeare? What do you do with lines like Othello's: 'Thy bed, lust stained, shall with lust's blood be spotted?’”

He smiled. “I ignore them.”

This was the reply of someone who had not been assigned to study Western Literature, someone whose perfect English and elegant spandex bespoke a world far different from that invoked by his wrinkled Mao jacket and faded, threadbare trousers. Revolutions must always divide generations; the abyss separating Zhang and others of his age from their younger colleagues is truly startling. At a banquet given for me, one of the senior professors, a cherubic old man named Leng Zi-Xing, proposed endless toasts to Yale where we had both been students, some forty years apart. We drank to Chauncy Brewster Tinker (long dead when I arrived), to the Sterling Library, to the Elizabethan Club, to the elms that have by now all succumbed to blight. As we laughed and drank, Leng looked into my eyes with a peculiar look I encountered at several other moments in China: a blend of cordiality and detached assessment. The old man, I felt, was measuring the distance between his knowledge of the human condition and mine. Mine fell far short, I'm afraid, but I thought of the Yiddish proverb, “Spare us what we can learn to endure.”

At another dinner, this time not at a fancy restaurant but in a bleak concrete shack, Hua Zi-Fang, a frail, wonderfully hospitable professor who, as a young man, had been at Harvard, showed me a book inscribed to him by the eminent Shakespeare scholar, George Lyman Kittredge. His wife Xue Bao-Chai had a still more precious memento: at my urging, she showed me her family album. It began with a yellowed nineteenth-century photograph of her famous, enlightened grandfather, by whom she had been raised: a young man poised for his first trip outside of China and obviously self-conscious about his Western suit and the wig beneath which he had tucked his queue. There followed baby pictures in the background of which one could glimpse the Shanghai mansion, vaguely Tudor, in which she had been raised; pictures of her friends from the missionary school to which she had been sent; pictures of her, wearing chic Western clothes, as a radicalized student at Beijing University in

the early thirties. Tucked away unmounted at the end of the album were a set of photographs from the 1950s of her grandfather and Mao, strolling together in conversation by the Temple of Heaven. I did not ask why she had not mounted these, but I did ask why she had carefully cut and discarded all but the heads of her friends in the pictures from the 1920s and 1930s. “During the Cultural Revolution, I could not hide my origins,” she said, “but if the album had fallen into the hands of unfriendly people, I did not wish to incriminate my friends by preserving pictures of them in bourgeois dress.”

The fear was not ungrounded. Hua and Xue both suffered terribly during the Cultural Revolution: their possessions were seized, their children taken from them, their names vilified. There were beatings, imprisonment, hard labor. Xue's impressive connections were useless; indeed they were the cause of the persecutions, along with her high culture, her membership in the intelligentsia, her impeccable, missionary-school English. Zhang was savagely treated – over five years in what he called a “concentration camp” – Leng Zi-Xing, the jovial drinker of drinks of toasts to Mother Yale, had spent the better part of a decade hauling night-soil on a commune in the north.

Near the end of my trip, in Shanghai, I gave a single lecture at Fudan University. The occasion was marked by the customary rituals of hospitality, which always included introductions to the senior members of the department. This formality is tied not only to the traditional Chinese respect for the old but to the fact that the present regime, in making reparations for the disasters inflicted by the Gang of Four, has installed in high positions those who suffered during the Cultural Revolution. But at Fudan, I was introduced to only one old man, Wang Xi-Teng. When I remarked on this at dinner, I was told that many of the professors in the English Department had committed suicide – ten in all – and that several others had been beaten to death. Shanghai was the fervent center of the Cultural Revolution.

To be old and a professor of English in China is to be a survivor. Not only had most such people, in the eyes of the Red Guard, been born into the wrong class, not only had they elected a profession in which they were removed from workers, soldiers, and peasants, but they had all committed a cultural crime, a crime confessed in the very subject they had chosen to study. An American friend who lived in China during the Cultural Revolution told me that she heard a strange sound outside her apartment one day and went to look: it was the sound of Western records – Bach, Mozart, Beethoven – being thrown from windows into the courtyard below.

The senior generation of literary intellectuals was nightmarishly vulnerable to attack at that time, even if they had unswervingly followed the twisting ideological currents of postliberation China. The generation below them – men and women now in their late forties and fifties – were slightly less vulnerable, if only because in 1965 they had not yet attained positions of authority, and because most of them had originally had less access to Western culture. In fact, they seemed less the repositories of that culture than its managerial assistants. But the young teachers I was meeting had the least access of all: in virtually every case their education had been drastically curtailed; they had spent two or three years in school doing nothing but political agitation and “self-criticism” (universally described as excruciatingly boring); and when the schools themselves were shut down, they had been sent to the countryside or factories to work.

Xiao Wu, the young man who had greeted me at the airport and whom I came to know quite well, laughed when he recalled the Cultural Revolution: “I ran around in the streets shouting that teachers were running dogs of U.S. imperialism. I was a Red Guard, you see, and now I’m a teacher myself.” How had he made the change, I asked, and how – since he had grown up in a peasant family in remote Gansu province – had he come to Beijing? After all, mobility of this kind, from country to city, from fields to university, is immensely difficult in China. In the early 1970s, Wu said, he had been assigned to work in a machine-tool factory where his job included directing the weekly political meetings at which the latest government directives and exhortations were read. (These meetings continue to be held throughout China – in the universities, on Wednesday afternoons.) Near the close of the Cultural Revolutions, when the regime took its first steps toward reconstruction of the shattered university system, an order came from the central government to choose from the factory’s sixteen hundred workers one man and one woman to be sent to Beijing to learn English.

“I had no real interest in learning English,” Xiao Wu said with a smile, “but I wanted to get to Beijing, so I applied.” Most of his friends applied too, but his political job enabled him to know the right line to take.

“What was the line?”

“I don't remember.”

“Sure you do. Let me guess, and you tell me if I’m close. ‘I want to learn English in order to promote the development and perfection of socialist politics and to struggle against imperialism. My only concern is to serve Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong thought. I will never use my knowledge of English to separate myself from the people.’”

Uproarious laughter. “That's right! That's exactly right!”

Were his friends – and as I asked this I thought of David Copperfield's warehouse mates, Mick Waller and Mealy Potatoes – disappointed and resentful that they were not chosen? “Of course.”

Those in Wu's position – the “worker-soldier-peasant students” who came to the university without any real high school education – hold enviable jobs compared with many of their peers, but in the context of the universities and institutes in which they teach, they are at a distinct disadvantage. Far more than their elders (those, at least, who survived), they bear the visible scars of the Cultural Revolution. For they have had painfully little access to the subjects they are assigned to study and teach, and they are treated with condescension both by their elders and by the new generation of post-Cultural Revolution students that is just now emerging. At the present time there is a popular mania in China for learning English, and in this climate those whose education was irreparably damaged by the Cultural Revolution are made to seem backward and dull. There are university lecturers in English whose command of the language is far exceeded by young workers whose passion is for poring over tattered dictionaries and chatting up foreign visitors. An eighteen-year-old who

once helped me on a Beijing trolley told me that she was a telephone operator and had learned her excellent English by listening in on all conversations in that language. “May I ask you a question?” an earnest young textile worker said to me at 6:30 one morning by the lake in Hangzhou. A crowd of fifteen or twenty others on their way to work instantly gathered around us. “What is the difference, please, between algae and kelp?”

Ten years ago Xiao Wu and his friends at a comparable age were shouting slogans about long-nosed foreign devils. It seems unlikely now that they will ever catch up either with their elders or with the younger students who have already surpassed their command of English.

“Is it hard to learn Swedish?” Xiao Wu asked me one day. “If I could learn Swedish I would be one of the only people in China to know the language, and I might have a chance to be sent abroad.”

The deep rifts that divide the generations in China posed a dilemma for me. To whom should my lectures be addressed? At what level should I make entry into my subject? What issues was it important to discuss? What model for literary study was I going to project, and whose interests would it serve? The questions were scarcely of major importance in themselves, but they were linked to issues of very real significance. For literature and literary criticism have no autonomy, in theory or practice, in China; they are intimately and inextricably bound up with the state. The traditional Confucian conception of literature was already deeply ethical and social, and this conception was then simultaneously confirmed and radicalized in Mao's “Talks on Literature and Art at the Yenan Forum.” In these statements, delivered forty years ago at an embattled moment and since elevated into national dogma, Mao declared that in judging a literary work, political criteria come first and artistic second, that a work's historical progressiveness and the author's attitude to the people are measures by which to judge a work's relative value; that writers must promote the cause of socialism and integrate themselves with the masses.

After the downfall of the Gang of Four, some oblique criticism of Mao's position – or, in the euphemistic language of Chinese politics, of “Leftist misinterpretation” of Mao's position – has been aired. The political test, it was charged, had been too rigidly and crudely applied, and, in the words of a *People's Daily* commentary, there had been “a tendency to create artistic and literary works by formula.” But just at the time of my visit to China, there was a reaction against this criticism, and a fierce struggle – still unresolved – emerged between those who wished to challenge or at least modify Mao's principles and those who wished to reaffirm them. The principal battleground is the artist's right to represent characters with mixed motives and to expose serious problems in the contemporary Chinese situation. For a brief period artists were encouraged to write denunciations of the Cultural Revolution, but the literary establishment has started once again to demand a more positive vision: “Having abolished exploitation,” write Ding Zhenhai and Li Zhun in the May 27, 1982, *China Daily*, “China is a society where the people control state power. Life has more and more of the new and the beautiful, and representing this aspect should be the major task of writers and artists. . . . Some recent works ignore this. They are shallow, incorrect in ideology and artistic expression, and leave bad influences on society.” Artists and writers, the article concludes, “must adopt a correct standpoint, be aware of their responsibility to socialism and create works which play positive roles.”

These arguments would seem to touch only contemporary literature (and thus leave at least my Shakespeare lectures undisturbed), but they have a strong historical dimension as well. For Marxism lays claim to identifying the “progressive” forces in any historical period, and hence the political test can be applied to the artists of the past. In the prevailing “moderate” mood, this principle leads less to a rejection of major figures in the European literary tradition than to a search for the radical politics of every great writer. With English literature this is a particularly thankless task; there are a few great radicals, to be sure, but they are outnumbered by writers who at least presented themselves as upholders of the values of the ruling elite. Often these apparently conservative artists produced works whose effect is far more corrosive and challenging to the dominant social order than the forthright denunciations of self-conscious revolutionaries, but at least until recently the Chinese seemed to need evidence of a more straightforward political engagement. Thus, if a Chinese scholar did not wish to scrap most of the tradition altogether, he had to indulge in what might be generously called acts of historical imagination. A single example: Shakespeare, declares the two-volume Chinese literary history assigned to undergraduates, always allied himself with the oppressed masses. Even after his retirement to Stratford, he fought on their behalf; indeed on one occasion he rushed back to London to struggle against some particularly cruel enclosures of common land. The story has a grain of truth. Shakespeare did concern himself with some enclosures in the early seventeenth century, but regrettably they were *his* enclosures, and he appears to have been trying to secure his own interests.

Moreover, it is never entirely clear that discussions of the past are just that – discussions of events and figures decisively removed from the conflicts of the present. There is an ancient tradition in China of conducting serious contemporary debate through the medium of historical argument and literary criticism. Recently, I was told, there was an official declaration that henceforth when history is discussed, the subject is to be understood as *really* history, not an indirect reflection on the present. But such a declaration only bears witness to the persistence of veiled debate and criticism. The principle extends to the choice of literary works to be studied or performed. For instance, the chief Shakespearean production in recent years in Beijing was *Measure for Measure*, a “problem play” far less frequently performed in the West than the major comedies and tragedies. It seems an odd choice until one reflects that its plot concerns the enigmatic withdrawal from authority of the rightful Duke, and the rise and fall of a fanatical, self-righteous, and corrupt lieutenant – in short, one version of recent Chinese history. In my own lectures I found myself drawn almost irresistibly into this oblique mode: when I recalled the plot of *King Lear* – the painful “retirement” of the absolute ruler and the demonic ascendancy of the four villains – there rippled through the huge audience waves of laughter and stifled comment. And when a student asked me if in *The Tempest* Shakespeare was weaving together art and power or insisting on their ultimate separation, I knew that the question did not only, or even principally, apply to early seventeenth-century England.

What did my audience want me to answer? What were they straining, with such eager attentiveness, to hear? What Zhang and his generation wanted to hear could be summed up in one word: formalism. They wanted me to talk about patterns of imagery, the interweaving of plot elements, the text's internal structure. They hoped for close readings, for a discussion of tradition and the individual talent, for an account of the inner “world” of a work of art,

for a version of literary history purged of power. This was indeed the heart of my own critical training, but my work over the past fifteen years has pulled against this formalism. I could commend close reading, but only as an initial strategy. For to understand literature, and particularly Renaissance literature, one must, I had learned, grapple with social, political, and economic forces. Shakespeare's theater was subject to ideological scrutiny, censorship, state regulation; plays set in the distant past were widely perceived as veiled commentary on the present; the Byzantine politics of the Elizabethan and Jacobean court spilled over onto the stage, while the players were frequently commanded to perform before the monarch. No wonder Zhang's generation wanted formalism. They were not indifferent to the conditions in which Shakespeare's plays were written and performed; they were living those conditions.

And the younger generations? They too had experienced the Cultural Revolution, and even without such memories they live now in a society that closely regulates what can and cannot be written by artists. But they seemed less certain that formalism would provide a solution – how could it, constructed as it was by their elders out of a prewar access to Western high culture, the culture of Richards, Empson, and Eliot? It was to this younger group, to students and faculty who would never achieve the intimate command of English upon which the technique of close reading and hence formalism is based, that I principally spoke. I urged them to understand the subtle blend in Shakespeare of subversion and submission, accommodation and resistance; I described the experimental work of contemporary American poets and novelists; and I unsettled as far as I could the stark oppositions – “positive roles” versus “decadent fantasy,” “serving socialism” versus “self-expression” – within which Chinese criticism has attempted to regiment all of literature.

Once, at the close of a lecture on *King Lear*, after the flood of questions had subsided and the crowd had thinned, a young woman in her early twenties came up to me and held out her hand. I took her hand in mine, though I did not at first understand her gesture, and then I saw that on her palm she had written something in English in tiny letters: a diagram in which she had attempted to chart the coordinated shifts in the structure of the family, the state, and human emotions from the Middle Ages to the present. An ambitious project for a small palm.

“It was better when the world was ruled by ritual and duty,” she said with a touch of Confucian nostalgia, “but now, in the West at least, everything is confused, and men are torn apart.” Then in the middle of the swarm of words – “absolutism,” “deference,” “love,” “surface,” “inner depth” – she drew, while I looked on, a single blue line and said, “There is Shakespeare at the center. He is the poet of this confusion.”

Toward the end of my trip, I was invited to lecture at the Foreign Language Institute in Xi'an, the ancient capital of the early dynasties and the site of some of the greatest archaeological finds in modern China. An official of the English Department, Professor Bu Gu-Xin, met me at the airport with a sign “Welcome Professor Queensplatt.” Professor Bu had taught Sanskrit until China broke off relations with India, Russian until China fell out with the Soviet Union; and now English. All conversations with him had time lags, as if conducted long distance.

I was led to the room where I was to give my lecture. It was very hot. Before I entered, I

was asked to remove my shoes and put on straw sandals. The lecture was to be videotaped, and the cadre in charge was afraid that dust might contaminate the equipment. My entrance was applauded by a group of older men and women who were sitting in the room in their stocking feet. These were the senior professors.

Before the lecture I was again led down the hall to another room where again my entrance was applauded by a larger group. These were the junior professors. They would watch my lecture on a monitor. Then upstairs, where I was introduced to a still larger group who would also watch me on a monitor: these were the graduate students. Finally, up another floor, the heat ever more stifling, to the room with the undergraduates. I told the students that I would come to them at the end of the lecture to answer any questions and to talk with them. But when I finished speaking, the monitors were shut off. There were questions first from the professors, then from the junior faculty down the hall. When I got upstairs at last, the halls were dark, the classrooms completely empty.

* * *

I do not wish to close on so bleak a note. On my last night in China my wife Ellen, who had joined me for the latter half of the visit, and I decided to go to see an acrobatic troupe perform at a splendid new theater. (We had earlier booked tickets for the acrobatic troupe in Suzhou and were mightily pleased that, with our smattering of Chinese, we had done it all by ourselves – until we arrived at the theater and discovered, when the curtain rose, that we were at the opera.) On the evening of the performance in Shanghai we had gorged ourselves, as usual, and were a bit late, so we decided to take a taxi. The man booking a taxi after us in the hotel was also going to see the acrobats, and we offered him a lift. A German from Bremen, in his mid-forties, a buyer of leather, he complained that the Chinese leather industry was not nearly so well run as the one in South Korea. We managed to show some mild interest.

“What China needs is a good period of liberalism like we had in Germany in the 30s.”

“Liberalism?” we gasped; “Do you mean the Nazis?”

“Oh yes, my father lived in Germany all during that period, of course, and knows first-hand how good it was. Don't believe everything the entertainment industry tells you.”

I could not speak; my wife managed to say, “You might have felt otherwise were you a Jew, or a gypsy, or any number of other people.”

“Oh yes, to be sure,” laughed our affable taxi-mate, as if Ellen had made a witticism.

By now we had arrived at the theater. We settled down to watch the show. After the plate twirlers and leapers and magicians and bird-call makers, its climax was a small man who came out and balanced on the bridge of his nose a wine glass, from which the flat bottom of the stem had been cut off. The man must have been in his late sixties, perhaps older – a survivor of decades of imperialism, rival warlords, invasion, purges, war, revolution. From a crystal decanter, he filled the wine glass while it was still on his nose; we applauded. He put a

glass tray on top of the wine glass; then four more wine glasses, filled like the first, on top of the glass tray; then small lamps between the glasses; then another glass tray; more glasses; more lamps. The lights in the theater dimmed; he was balancing a chandelier on his nose.

He was then brought two free-standing ladders (the kind you need to lean against something). And he was brought a clarinet. Somehow he managed to climb the ladders – one poised shakily on each side of him – with the clarinet in his mouth and the chandelier still on his nose. And at the top – to the astonishment and delight of the People's Liberation Army soldiers and the factory workers and the tourists and, somewhere in the crowd, the Nazi – he played the old Yiddish melody, “Bei mir bist du sheyn.”

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Story-Telling by Stephen Greenblatt

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My earliest recollections of “having an identity” or “being a self” are bound up with story-telling - narrating my own life or having it narrated for me by my mother. I suppose that I usually used the personal pronoun “I” in telling my own stories and that my mother used my name, but the heart of the initial experience of selfhood lay in the stories, not in the unequivocal, unmediated possession of an identity. Indeed the stories need not have been directly about the for me to experience them as an expression of my identity: my mother was generously fond of telling me long stories I found irresistible about someone named Terrible Stanley, a child whom I superficially resembled but who made a series of disastrous life decisions - running into traffic, playing with matches, climbing out onto the window ledge, or trying to squeeze through the bars on the cast-iron railing that enclosed the back porch where my mother would hang the washing. We lived in Roxbury then - in those days one of Boston's main Jewish neighborhoods -- and Terrible Stanley's worst, and most delicious, misadventures involved the nearby Franklin Park Zoo.

I am presumably one of the few Americans who woke regularly as a child to the sound of lions roaring in the distance. I can still remember pacing back and forth on the porch and imagining that I was a caged lion. My mother has a picture of me holding on to the bars and with my mouth open wide. I suppose I was roaring. Contrary to *his* mother's explicit warnings and his own solemn promises, Terrible Stanley would sneak away from Maple Court (where we also happened to live), walk down Wayne Street past the Garrison Public School (where my brother was caned in the early 1950s for refusing to recite the catechism), cross Blue Hill Avenue, and go to the zoo. On innumerable occasions, he narrowly escaped being eaten by the lions or crushed in the terrible embrace of the pythons. The zoo was hard to resist.

As I grew slightly older, the sense of identity as intertwined with narratives of the self and its doubles was confirmed by my father, who also had a penchant for story-telling - stories not so gratifyingly focused on my small being as my mother's were, but compelling and wonderfully well-told stories of himself and of a cousin, a few years younger than he, by whom he was virtually obsessed. My father and his cousin came from almost identical backgrounds: first-generation Americans born in Boston to poor Jewish Immigrants from Lithuania. Like my father, the cousin had become a lawyer, and here began the story. My father was named Harry J. Greenblatt, his cousin Joseph H. Greenblatt. But when the latter became a lawyer, he moved into the same building in which my father had his office, and he began to call himself J. Harry Greenblatt. He managed, or so my father thought, to siphon off some clients from my father's already established practice. By itself this would have been enough to cause considerable tension, but over the years J. Harry compounded the offense by apparently becoming considerably richer than my father, Harry J. - wealth, as far as I can tell, being measured principally by the amount of money donated annually to local charities, the contributions printed annually in a small but well-perused booklet. There were, as I grew up, endless stories about J. Harry - chance encounters in the street, confusions of identity

that always seemed to work to my father's disadvantage, tearful reconciliations that would quickly give way to renewed rancor, great potlatches of charitable contributions. This went on for decades and would, I suppose, have become intolerably boring had my father not possessed considerable comic gifts, along with a vast repertory of other stories.

But a few years before my father's death at eighty-six, the rivalry and doubling took a strange twist: J. Harry Greenblatt was indicted on charges of embezzlement; the charges were prominently reported in the newspapers; and the newspapers mistakenly printed the name of the culprit - convicted and sentenced to prison - as Harry J. Greenblatt. Busybodies phoned our house to offer their commiserations to my mother. The confusion was awkward, but it had at least one benefit: it enabled my father to tell a whole new set of stories about himself and his double. When you are in your eighties, new stories can be a precious commodity.

My father's narrative impulse, I can see from this distance, was a strategic way of turning disappointment, anger, rivalry, and a sense of menace into comic pleasure, a way of reestablishing the self on the site of its threatened loss. But there was an underside to this strategy that I have hinted at by calling his stories obsessive. For the stories in some sense *were* the loss of identity which they were meant to ward off - there was something compulsive about them, as if someone were standing outside of my father and insisting that he endlessly recite his tales. Near the end of his life, he would sometimes abandon the pretence of having a conversation, interrupt what was being said, and simply begin to tell one of his stories.

This sense of compulsiveness in the telling of stories is not simply a function of garrulous old age; it is, I think, a quality that attaches to narrative itself, a quality thematized in *The Arabian Nights* and *The Ancient Mariner*. In response to the compulsiveness there have arisen numerous social and aesthetic regulations - not only the rules that govern civil conversation but the rules, that govern the production and reception of narrative in books, on screen, on the stage. And there have arisen, too, less evident but powerful psychic regulations that govern how much narrative you are meant to experience, as it were, within your identity.

One of the worst times I have ever been through in my life was a period - I cannot recall if it was a matter of days or weeks - when I could not rid my mind of the impulse to narrate my being. I was a student at Cambridge, trying to decide whether to return to America and go to law school or graduate school in English. "He's sitting at his desk, trying to decide what to do with his life," a voice - my voice, I suppose, but also not my voice - spoke within my head. "Now he's putting his head on his hand; now he is furrowing his brow; and now he is getting up to open the window." And on and on, with a slight tone of derision through it all. I was split off from myself, J. Harry to my Harry J. (or Terrible Stanley to my Stephen), in an unhappy reprise of my early sense of self as story. It was unhappy, I suppose, because by my early twenties my identity had been fashioned as a single being exactly corresponding to the personal pronoun "I," and the unpleasantly ironic "he" sounding inside my head felt like an internal violation of my internal space, an invasion of my privacy, an objectification of what I least wished to objectify. I experienced the compulsive and detached narrativizing voice as something that had seized me, that I could not throw off, for even my attempts to do so were immediately turned into narrative. It

occurred to me that I might be going mad. When the voice left me, it did so suddenly, inexplicably with the sound of something snapping.

If the experience I have just described intensified my interest in narrative, it made me quite literally wish to get the narratives outside myself. Hence the critical distance that I attempt to inscribe in and with the stories I tell, for the narrative impulse in my writing is yoked to the service of literary and cultural criticism; it pulls out and away from myself. Hence too, perhaps, my fascination with figures of estrangement: I could not endure the compulsive estrangement of my life, as if it belonged to someone else, but I could perhaps understand the uncanny otherness of my own voice, make it comprehensible and bring it under rational control by trying to understand the way in which all voices come to be woven out of strands of alien experience. I am committed to making strange what has become familiar, to demonstrating that what seems an untroubling and untroubled part of ourselves (for example, Shakespeare) is actually part of something else, something different.

We spent last spring in Boston, and I wanted to take my wife to the apartment house in Roxbury. My mother and everyone else in my family told us that we shouldn't go back to the old neighborhood. I had lived in California too long, they said, and didn't know what it was like. There are murders every night, said my cousin Sherman; whites aren't welcome, said my cousin Ann; there is nothing to see, said my cousin Eldon; the animals in the zoo have been killed off one by one, with bb guns and poison, said my brother, and the park is a nightmare, even in broad daylight. Of course, we went anyway. That is, after all, the lesson of the Terrible Stanley stories.

There were lots of animals in the zoo - I don't know if the cages had been restocked or if the story of the killings was merely a grim joke that had eventually, in the tense and racist atmosphere of Boston, been received as truth. The park, designed by Olmstead, looked beautiful, easily the loveliest green space in the entire city. But my family was right that the neighborhood looked awful: the streets empty, shops boarded up, trash piled on the sidewalks, windows broken everywhere, graffiti spray-painted on walls. No landlord or bank had put any money into the buildings for years, probably for decades. We found the great old synagogue. Mishkan Tefilah, whose vast neo-classical bulk still dominates the area: it was torched, I don't know when, and stands in massive, burned-out desolation.

About half the windows of the apartment house on Maple Court were boarded up, but there were people living there, and I could see washing hanging from the porch where I used to practice my roaring. On the driveway below the porch, a young woman was waxing her car. She heard me say to my wife that that was the apartment we used to live in, and she beckoned to us, "Stand here for a few minutes and let people see that you're talking to me." She spoke in the tone of quiet urgency with which my mother used to enjoin me not to go to the zoo, not to wander off from the haven of the apartment. "Then get out quickly," she added. "It's not safe for you to be here."

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poetry

Birthday Afghan by Rebecca Balcarcel

Fourteen candles, round cake a fire flower,
and the fattest package an afghan
crocheted during Grandma's hot toast mornings
while the world flung the rest of us on its game board.
I hug the yarn -- gray squares, pink rosettes,
bury my face in loops of chewing-gum,
strands of shark fin.

A boy touched me today. A boy touched
me today. A boy touched me
cross your ankles, cross your legs, cross your heart
in the curve above my hip.
My skin singed, warm even after he walked to class.
I cross my fingers.

Folded bulk at the bed's edge
unfurls to rows of roses.
I lie back, melding to petals.
Identity's a scent.
My breath rides the ceiling fan blades.
In a year maybe, twelve petals, I would rise a complete pattern.

Grandma, what will I tell Ms. Martin
who believes my white blouse, my neat handwriting?
She will squint at her gradebook,
zero's slashed eye next to my name.
Her sour sigh will fall into my stomach.
I wrap myself in the hinged flowers.

His mother caught us.
My cardigan unbuttoned, hair bow
slanting down my braid,
air too flimsy to hold my voice,
and he looked at my shoes until I left.
She said, "I won't tell your father."

Afghan over my head,
I look out through laticework.
Light goes dark under the door.
I clutch Grandma's yarn, fingers stranded beyond roses,
fingertips dipping
into all that is tumbling toward me.

The Poet by Jonas Kyle-Sidell

It's a crisp night tonight, a full moon, and it
seems I am hard-wired for failure.
Not nobody, not nothing, can jump-start me
into conformance. Radiance, though,

is not a problem. I could beam from here
to someplace light-years away! Not
to worry, they'll get the signal in the year
2050. Maybe I ultimately have too

sideways an opinion of myself for this
straight-up world. Maybe I'm lazy.
Maybe I'm stubborn. My persuasion runs
irreverent but in sync – aware of the

world as an organism and a machine, where
life is hard and most people are tough
on each other. And the soul fights for its right
to breath. Take a walk down Grand

Ave. with me! I know a place where these
buildings open up to the river and the
city. Only a handful like me survive. Hot-
headed prophets who are weary of

what's being said, searching for something
fresh and real to hold on to, to save
ourselves, the people, and the world! It is true
when we contract and go down, silently

and unnoticed – just a dream are these images
sprung from ample blood to the soul,
so for most of us it happens, in dark alleys
some places and next to washed-up

wishing wells. Maybe I was born for this!
Born to rap salutations and valedictions
through peepholes, on doors, to rooms off
uninviting hallways, that won't open,

over noises loud and encumbering, to people
who'd give a damn . . .

Private Nation by Jonas Kyle-Sidell

Sunlight beats its
way through my window and
pours light in. First off, I write

a morning poem, so that
for the rest of the day I might

speak, unabashed, in metaphors.

I forget about
onslaughts throughout my day
for the ensemble of light –

*your kiss beneath
the sounds of traffic, your touch
at every hydrant, pole, rail, wall,
or window to lean on!*

Later on, however, I need a
supplementary style for better
mobility. I adopt slight gestures for
secular communication. There are so
many kinds of us – so many miles to
cross, and bridges to bear.

The economy, by any given standard,
of my private nation is good – is hot!
Let every Tom, Dick,

and Harry, every Kat with a dream,
watch me walk down Broadway,
or let nobody watch me.

Let the descending, honey-
suckled light, as it throws its casual
aura over the city and muscles up
a beautiful pink sky, the wild lights
and the cooling air be my witness.

Let me dream of the South
right now, as I weave in and out of
players and thieves – of dirt beneath
my feet, leaves cackling from old
oaks and pines, gardenias on the edges
of summer air . . .

I'm potentially twisted along about the
train's last stop –

the steadily rising moon becomes
confounded by lonesome air.

Heading back to the room I'm staying in,
I'm tumbling nowhere good –

like a mummy whose tape is rapidly unraveling,
I'm about to turn into dust . . .

Exposed, now; however, I am quietly seduced!

There are lovers and eyes around, children
about, and pairs of shoes a-flung over telephone
wire.

It, once again, amounts to a world that can –
safely – in its ludicrousness, steal my heart
away.

Approaching my room, I give myself – right
before I strip the world of any of its lies –
slack. An extra allocation of bounce thereby
expanding the breadth where within my
behaviors are measured. I remind my senses
that grip reality, of the truth of relative
consciousness, and of pathology, and its
natural domain. With this, I wipe the
template clean.

Now I, beneath a dark room, reverential
night, go ahead and shut her down –
put on some Springsteen, and shake her
loose: cool, uncap a beer, while staring
out the window, and hoping for rain!

Here I am, foolishly undressing then
cloaking, repeatedly, my skin from my
body, loosely associating and weaving
my dreams –

*dig me here, tonight, mama,
follow me down and I'll show you how!
Dig me here, tonight, mama,*

follow me down and I'll show you how!

Headlights and sirens slip the grace of streetlight
and cross the room.

Coming Off the Mountain by Casady Monroe

somehow
I understood
hallucination, water,
repetition of dry bone
and rattlesnake
an indent
where the shine gave depth,
pooling of solid surface
as brown gave to red or
a slight orange tone
blued earth.

warning mountain lion
then up through the brush
branching of legs
the sternum of small thing
or large clavicle
dusty
one glib vertebra
I pick up,
a worry stone

tinkling, black-tongued eyes
that follow me
forward
long, flicking mouth
and shuddering noise
plug the path
whose grey and brown body,
strewn deadwood and curlings,
flowers with dogged heads,
suggest this music

how many parts can we pick up and carry,
a beautiful collage of what's left.
hulk of an arm
shell of a face
odd beetled rib cage
the ear of a facet
the faucet, the running and the draining
the downlooking face of lumbar
sacrum see butterfly, pelvis,
parabolic rib upper extremity

lower extremity

a joint dents the cool ground,
must have been several killed
I see another shoulder
and the trees look slicked with rain.

Vespers by Kate Schmitt

for Fred Busch

It's getting darker.
Night will soon take the trees,
the drum-like earth between them.

Night will take the roads,
their lines stitching seconds.
The jackrabbit and the old dog.

It's not a long time
that the light takes to sift away
so right now catch yourself like a firefly,

hold yourself in your own gentle hands.
Because as you pull back the covers
you will fall into the deep holes

your dead have made
and try to find them, knowing
where? isn't the right question

and knowing you have no other.
Try to believe anything,
dark clarity pressing against you,

filling your mouth and eyes.
You will see your life for what it is.
So find comfort now

as night pools in your room,
dark water that pulls in the light
and doesn't give it back.

One Small Piece by Kate Schmitt

I could tuck your hands neatly inside mittens.
I am tired of piecing things together.
I think I will go now, I say,
and I can see outside the window behind you
a patch of the lake in a thin stream
melting the reflection of the streetlight,
dozens of matches in dark space.
I think of all the buttons I have saved,
the ripped threads, the open windows I've passed.

The snow is old outside like ashes. Inside
you are still and I fall away from you quietly.

Uncle Jamesie Recording December's Unbroken Law

by Tom Sheehan

Two other bums
tripped over him on the tracks,
Boston outbound, in December,
under a Malden moon
fracturing itself

on ice, on rails becoming one,
on his last breath caught upright.
They dropped him on my mother's bed,
cut his ragged Mackinaw off, booted laces,
found him a worn dark suit

at the *A.O.H.*
They'd found two pages
of *Blackstone* in his pocket,
the failure who studied two pages a day
for the remnant of his life;

these even marked,
pencil frozen under key words,
stones set aside to be memorialized.
But his feet, freed of boots,
blackest of my young deaths.

I watched dread ice
slowly dismount his lashes,
saw soft tears of it go back into
his eyes, star-burst loosed from icicles,
wondered what last word he had read,

remembered. Know December now,
boots, laces, harsh cry of bedsprings,
how the significant mouth of this month
starts coming down midnight tracks
with slow howls, and dark justices,

robed in the cold crawl of it,
sitting, pointing.

A Time of Time by Alex Tamaki

It is now, a time for singing.
All our worries, past, away,
But yet, to come again.
So, the future; now, for joy
And all we have, to rest.
Going into happiness,
But I am tired, nonetheless.

And when the singers come,
And through their hollow hills
And thinning smoke, drifting apart,
And when we laugh, and others cry;
Cry, who cry where else.
And in our sunlit merry time
The time of them has but soon passed
Or, remaining, yet to come.

And time soon slips, and changing places,
The time of time reveals,
We are, then, the ones who cry.
And the times of times
That leave: and floating back,
Times of when, and we were young,
And even if we are.

And while those graduating come
And dance, and singing, fly;
And walk off, longer, down the road,
And into warmth, I wish for them;

But when they leave,
Too, weariness leaves
This I only hope;
For with their parting, mournful, yes,
The time of time may shift again,
And, give birth, and so remake
The others' time of joy.

Even while I cry, or we.

Calcutta, 10:05 am by Pinky Vincent

Flaming red hair juts from the square hole
in that apartment across; (the walls white)
Like a bulging egg yolk, sunny side up
Her hands soft and shriveled rest on the sill
Brown eyes fixed on bustling bazaar below.

Street vendors draw battle lines on sidewalks
Blue plastic sheets pinned down by pale red bricks
Bus conductors cry out destinations
Chowringhee, Dalhousie, Park Street
Nameless hands reach for the conductor
Like survivors readying for another skirmish.

Inside, body on body smell
Of starched saris drenched in sweat
Talcum powder turn dew drops on temples
Smudge necks like plaster of Paris on walls
A hand caresses a draped buttock
The mound turns marble; the trespasser smirks,
Come on, woman, what will you do?

**stage
&
screen**

A Monologue by Casady Monroe

Scene

There are seven fires with people sitting on the ground eye-level to the fire. Cas is at the center one, sitting cross-legged in front of the campfire. She is wrapped in layers of clothing and blankets. Her arms are propped up on her sides, half outstretched. Her eyes are closed.

Cas: Please. Please.

White face, brown hands. White face, brown hands.

Carrying it across tent thresholds. Raising it above head level.

Never let go of it.

Showing it to horses.

Please. Please.

A-kuu-ruu-deshh-ka.

I told you,

The rain went west, why don't you follow it?

Should anyone make this way, I beg you.

Fill these bowls with what then?

Basins filled with arrowheads or kabuki knives.

Lights blink quickly. Cas looks at the audience and speaks.

Cas: I don't know what I was thinking. I wrote, the first people were not the first person.

I tried to explain it to Dawson using some bullshit diatribe on minority exclusion

in archetypal masculinity. This stuff is maybe made up to begin with anyways,

but he chuckled when I mentioned climbing trees and skipping stones with the

Arkansas boys in the Garden of Eden. I mean, he teaches gender and migration

theory to undergrads so I feel allowed to daydream in his papers. Besides, it was

one of those little two-pagers, an assignment designed for closing your eyes and

leaning into a fast wind to see what hits. The first people were not the first person.

I feel like a more accurate explanation would have been, I was thinking about the

order with which you arrive at a party. Indians used to show up to our family

reunions; they were our blood and they were Sioux. A lot of them had names that initially

seemed to be perversions of American names, so that around the

backyard speakers you could catch bits of confused conversation.

"Allison?" "No, Wildsun." "ALLI-son?" "No, W-EYE-uld-sun."

Someone trying to call Ever Blooming, Mrs. Blooming.

My Aunt Diana used to sit like a white bird among them. Something about her

always seemed hugely inappropriate, and people talked about her being a lesbian

and having various roommates. She used to give me fancy lighters, ones with long

strike bars or button triggers. At my graduation she slipped me a folded twenty.

She wasn't the type to give cards.

I think I had secretly been hoping for some of the Indians to show up at my

graduation. A single tear down a Navajo cheek as I walk across the stage. But I

have not seen them in a long time, not since that handful of family reunions.

I remember the red paisley tablecloths spread out and dogs running around with matching bandanas. My sister running up to me, giggling, "They have beads and silver in their hair. Even the men!"

These people, though, the Indians, I try to remember them now and it's hard. A beardless man leans darkly in the sun. His two braids cinched with blue elastic, he props his cigarette hand on his horse. He catches me staring and winks, says, "The fry bread, with your mother's chicken salad, you must try it."

But that can't be how it really was, can it? See, the years have turned them into movie images.

Cas rifles through a backpack and pulls out a thick stack of papers.

Cas: My dad is a genealogy freak. I honestly don't know what drives a person to become interested in that. I mean, my god, car trips to and hours spent in libraries and cemeteries just to find out when some McCullen was born, or how many Dowells were county officials.

I imagine it has something to do with him being the last and only son.

As women, we don't get these notions in our heads, that we can look back at all of the names that have come from us and our mothers and our grandmothers and claim them. No, you'd think it would be more natural for us to claim them, since they lived in our bodies, since our bodies had to cleave for them to live. But we don't do that.

My dad's folder has a thousand Scot-Irish pages. He's got the suicides there, and he's got the technicians. He's got my grandfather too, with his broad face, dark and seven feet tall. His page has a few extra notes my mother must have supplied:

-Romeo y Julieta cigars

-1952

-Lake Benton, Minnesota

-3-4 hours before death, screamed at the nurses, "You are killing me! You are killing me! You are killing me!"

I wonder if he ever looks at the things in his office. All of the mallard ducks, and a painting of buffalo above the fireplace. They are matted in navy.

My dad has us back three hundred years, but no Indian blood.

What did I see when I closed my eyes?

I was living someone else's life.

The fire projecting shadows from a hundred years ago.

(An Indian with a mask on.

Robes crossing land bridges from Japan,

Running and carrying mirrors.)

And everywhere the land looked a little divided. In my head, multiple fields of vision.

The white face floating and the shank's brown hands.

Lights dim and reopen. Cas pokes around in the fire with a stick.

Cas: My fifth grade geography teacher, Mr. Tibbits, told us that women are delicate

vases. I waited for the other half of that lesson, which we never got. If women are vases, then men are... my dad, Mark, would say flowers, but he has no sense of analogy. He probably wouldn't notice, or at least pretend not to notice, that it was largely a sexual metaphor. But would he say flowers? My dad never held a tulip in his life. Women are delicate vases though; my mother cried when she told us, "Your father is a selfish lover." Men are...

Cas closes eyes and stands for a minute. Then moves to sit on the bench, seems to be wiping tears off her face.

Cas: I find myself needing to explain myself way too often. That's something I've never even wanted to do: examining my actions, retelling my motives. Sometimes I feel like the most beautiful people are ghosts. He said, "Everyone can hear us. You call me a child, but you're over there making noises and carrying on." I wouldn't have cared if the whole camp could hear us. But he was right, so I said to him, "Look, I'm sorry I freaked out, but I just wanted you to look at me." It seemed like something he would want to hear. I wondered if I could tell him what I saw without all the explaining. So I told him, "I don't know where the vision came from, only that He twisted metal feathers into my gut and sang a Pow-Wow. He sang, 'I am creating space.'" I let that statement just sort of be for a minute. He had a weird look in his eyes, a small picture of the fire stretched on his pupil.

contributors

Rebecca Balcarcel (“Birthday Afghan”) took an MFA from Bennington Writing Seminars and teaches creative writing at Tarrant County College. Her work has appeared in *North American Review*, *Concho River Review*, and elsewhere. She is the mother of identical twins, and once biked from Houston to Santa Fe.

Nancy Bonnington (“A.M. or P.M.”) was born and raised in Seattle and works as a computer programmer for the Women’s Health Initiative at Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center. She has an English degree from the University of Washington, where she also studied music performance. Nancy enjoys writing poetry, plays, and short stories and is working on her first novel.

Stephen Greenblatt is the John Cogan University Professor of the Humanities at Harvard University, editor of *The Norton Shakespeare*, and prizewinning author of many critical works, including *Hamlet in Purgatory*. He is also the bestselling author of the literary biography of William Shakespeare, *Will in the World*.

David William Hill (“A Small, Meaningful Death”) recently completed his MFA at San Francisco State and now teaches Freshman Composition at the Academy of Art. His fiction has appeared previously in *Cimarron Review*. He lives in Vallejo, CA.

Jonas Kyle-Sidell (“Private Nation” and “The Poet”) was born in Los Angeles, before moving with his family to Decatur, GA at the age of fifteen. Kyle-Sidell hold a bachelors in psychology from Georgia State University, and will have a poem featured in the forthcoming *Los Angeles Review*. After traveling around a bit (Los Angeles, New York City), he lives in Decatur, GA, pursuing acceptance into grad school for poetry, and continuing to write to hold up the world.

G. Abam Mambo (“To Grieve in America”) was born and raised in Yaounde, Cameroon, and moved to the United States at 16. She received her Bachelor's degree in English and Political Science from the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, and her J.D. from the University of Michigan Law School. She currently lives in Minneapolis, where she works as an employment lawyer.

Casady Monroe (“A Monologue” and “Coming Off the Mountain”) is currently working on her MFA at the University of Colorado. Her plays and poems have appeared in *Eros*, *Prick of the Spindle*, and *Conceit Magazine*. She has worked as a poetry editor for *Analecta* and *Square One*, as well as a contributing writer for a Texas tourism magazine, where she researched bed and breakfasts and Willie Nelson. Her present projects include a translation of Théodore de Banville’s Rondels and a lengthy manuscript of poetry that blends experimental language with themes from her childhood in Oklahoma.

Monet Moutrie (“Yeast and Yarn”) is currently studying Creative Writing at the University of Colorado-Denver. She plans on travelling and pursuing an MFA in fiction after

graduating in 2008. She lives in Capitol Hill and engages with a community inspired and motivated by the humanities.

Shannon Prince (“Ayanas”) is a creative writing major and junior at Dartmouth College. In addition to writing, she is an activist for indigenous and African issues, a ceramics maker, and a travel addict. She has been published in *Illogical Muse*, *Damn Good Writing*, *Houston Literary Review*, *Words on Paper*, *The Green Muse*, and other journals.

Kate Schmitt (“Vespers”) has an MFA from the University of Houston’s Creative Writing Program. Her poems have appeared in the anthologies *Earth Shattering Poems*, *Light Gathering Poems*, *Roots and Flowers*, and *I Just Hope It’s Lethal*, as well as in literary journals, including *Southern Poetry Review* and *Birmingham Poetry Review*. She is currently teaching and completing a Ph.D. in Literature and Creative Writing at University of Houston.

Tom Sheehan (“Uncle Jamesie Recording of December's Unbroken Law”) is a veteran of the Korean War (31st Infantry Regiment), a Boston College grad after Army service, and has been retired for 17 years. Tom Sheehan’s *Epic Cures*, short stories from Press 53, won a 2006 IPPY Award from Independent Publishers. *A Collection of Friends*, memoirs, 2004 from Pocol Press, was nominated for PEN America Albrend Memoir Award. His fourth poetry book, *This Rare Earth & Other Flights*, was issued by Lit Pot Press in 2003. Print mysteries are *Vigilantes East and Death* for the *Phantom Receiver*. Six novels seek publication. His short story collection, *Brief Cases, Short Spans*, will be issued in 2008, and *The Quickening Source* is completed. He has nominations for nine Pushcart Prizes and two Million Writers Awards, a Silver Rose Award from ART for short story excellence, and many Internet appearances.

Alex Tamaki (“A Time of Time”) grew up in Santa Monica and Venice, CA. He is currently a freshman at Oberlin College, where he plans to study Creative Writing. Some of his favorite authors and sources of inspiration are: Hermann Hesse, Japanese writer Eiji Yoshikawa, the Haiku poet Issa, Thoreau, and Graham Greene.

Jay Todd (“Not Josef”) received his Ph.D. from the University of Southern Mississippi’s Center for Writers in 2006 and now teaches composition and directs the Writing Center at Xavier University of Louisiana. His fiction has recently appeared in *The Chicago Quarterly Review* and *Phantasmagoria*. He lives in Bogalusa, Louisiana, with his wife and step-daughter.

Pinky Vincent (“Calcutta, 10:05am”) is an Indian writer based in New York. She has been published in United States and Indian publications.

Sung J. Woo (“The Foundation of the Heart”) is a writer living in New Jersey. Some of his short stories and essays have appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, *Storyglossia*, and *In Posse Review*. *Everything Asian*, his debut novel, will be published in the spring of 2009.

Jennifer Yee (“Glutton”) graduated from the Tisch School of the arts at NYU with a BFA in Theatre and a minor in Anthropology. She has returned to the University of Hawaii to finish a Masters degree in Creative Writing after a two-year hiatus spent working in Japan. She works full-time as a caregiver and tutor in Honolulu.